

'Passion for Justice'

A Sixties activist praises the efforts of today's students

A few days before my nineteenth birthday, on a mild night more than forty years ago, I guarded a window outside Willard Straight Hall as part of a "protective ring" organized by Students for a Democratic Society during the famous Straight takeover. I considered myself an activist for social justice—and still do.

Not long after my sixtieth birthday, I took another action for social justice just a short distance from that window when I bought a Cornell T-shirt at the campus store. A colorful tag attached to the shirt had a photo of one of the workers who had made it. On the tag, she explained that the Alta Gracia brand was unique because its workers in the Dominican Republic are unionized, well-treated, and paid much better than similar workers in other countries. The worker's statement explained that by working for Alta Gracia she was able to support her children and send them to school.

I was able to put my money where my principles are, thanks to the current generation of student activists in the Cornell Organization for Labor Action (COLA) and Cornell Students Against Sweatshops (CSAS), who had persuaded the store to sell Alta Gracia clothing. This was just one of many successful campaigns that have been waged by COLA and CSAS. To cite another, in 2010 their lobbying resulted in the University administration threatening to drop its athletic-wear licensing contract with Nike. This action by Cornell and other universities helped convince Nike to take responsibility for providing laid-off Honduran workers with a \$1.5 million relief fund, vocational support, and health care. COLA and CSAS also sent delegations to the huge and historic labor demonstrations in Wisconsin and Ohio that protested challenges to public employee bargaining rights, and here in Ithaca they urged the city council to adopt a living wage ordinance.



Student support: CSAS members (left to right) Susanne Donovan '13, Gleb Drobkov '12, Mario Cespedes '13, Melissa Lukaszewicz '14, Debby Cho '12, Rachael Blumenthal '14 and Molly Beckhardt '14.

I'm fortunate because my job at the ILR school's Division of Extension and Outreach and my position on the ILR Alumni Association's board of directors put me in contact with the inspiring and impressive students in COLA and CSAS. I returned to Cornell in 1986 after working as an organizer, representative, negotiator, and educator for several labor unions. Drawing on my experience and contacts, I advise and assist ILR students who are interested in working in the labor movement or other social justice organizations. Today's students seem more focused and practical than those from my undergraduate years, but—most important—they have the same passion for justice.

At a time when college students are often characterized as mainly concerned with careers and money, I'm proud of the activist Cornell students I have met. I encourage you to visit the Cornell Store or to go online and buy Alta Gracia logo clothing. Every time you wear it, you can feel a connection to the students who are dedicated to working for fairness and justice in the world. There have always been some students willing to take risks to work for justice, and in the past few years the number doing so seems to have increased. I find that gratifying, and I feel a strong connection with them. They give me hope.

— *Ken Margolies '71, MPS '11*