Voices That Challenge

The youth in our society have an important voice. They read, listen, see, and have life experiences that work together and allow them to form opinions about events in society.

High School students are tomorrow’s leaders, and tomorrow is right around the corner.

In this issue of We Commit Ourselves I present to you the voices of students from Regina High School, Trinity High School, and Clare Woods Academy concerning topics of social concern that are important to them. The writings of these young people reflect concern, compassion, and the Franciscan values being instilled in them at home and in school.

Let us listen to their voices and be proud of our future leaders.

Poverty

Megan Weingartz, Regina High School

Poverty causes many families distress, hunger, and a lack of basic needs and opportunities. According to the United States Census Bureau, the official poverty rate in 2015 was 13.5 percent, down 1.2 percentage points from 14.8 percent in 2014 (Proctor Semega Kollar).

Even though poverty is declining, it is still very much alive in the world today. I experienced this first-hand about two years ago when I went on a service mission trip to Nicaragua. I was able to see the struggle of the native people of the country through their eyes and in their hearts. We had the opportunity to visit a school while I was there and they were feeding the children the little that they had at the school while telling us that it would be the only meal they would receive that day.

An unforgettable part of this trip was seeing two young boys, ages 8 and 10 who, because of malnutrition, were around the size of what 4-year old boys in the United States look like.

Poverty is such a major issue and it is attempting to be dealt with in the United States by organizations like Food for the Poor, which is the organization through which my family and I traveled.

Organizations like this are making major strides to better the way of life for people living below the poverty line. We need to have more organizations that can understand and pledge to help those who are unable to help themselves.

During my trip to Nicaragua, I personally could see the distress of a woman, a mother of six children, as she walked six miles to the nearest stream to get water for her children—the same water that animals, such as horses and cows defecated and urinated in. The water she would bring back to her children gave her daughter a terrible stomach condition. Because of this, she had to carry her 8-year old daughter ten miles to the hospital each month for treatment she could barely even afford. She was unable to obtain a job in the

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declining job market, so she started selling everything she made by hand. She sold earrings, necklaces, and bracelets.

The lack of opportunities affected her so much that she starved herself just so she could feed her children.

Poverty is such a major stressor and in that country there is no way of pulling out of it or making it disappear. Poverty is a sad cycle that we, as human beings and as Catholics, need to take a stand against and help the fight for basic human rights for all people.

Understanding and Combating Homelessness

By Barbara Garran, Trinity High School

Everyone is affected by a social issue in some way or another: some people are homeless, some are affected by mental illness, and some people are caught up with violence whether it be through violent relationships, or abusive parents.

As human beings, most of us feel the need to help and care for others, and feel drawn to those who need extra assistance, or a helping hand once in a while. During one point in our lives, we have all walked past the people begging for change or a meal on the street. Sometimes we give, other times, we do not.

The reason for our pickiness when it comes to giving is usually based on fear; fear that the money we give to them will not be used for what they say.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them." Whether it is in downtown Cleveland, Chicago, or New York, they all usually want the same thing, a helping hand.

Homelessness is an issue that affects an estimated 564,700 in the United States on any given night, and an approximate 83,200 of the 564,700 are considered "chronically homeless." Some of them who ran away when they were teens will probably continue to be homeless for the majority, if not all, of their lives.

There are many reasons people turn to the streets as a shelter. Much of the time, however, it is not by choice; it is often unavoidable and they have no other option, or at least feel as if there is no other option for them.

Many teens and youth live on the streets due to some type of family conflict, typically divorce, abuse, and neglect. It can be difficult for adults or other teens that are more fortunate to understand and sympathize with homeless teens and youth.

As teenagers, we are often regarded as careless individuals who have little to no interest in anything if it does not involve us; however, this is not true. We as people and as Christians are called to fight against social injustice and defend the dignity of the human person. My senior theology class at Trinity High School focuses on social justice and how we can identify those needs and address them.

I am proud to say that I am reaching out and being a part of the solution to this social justice issue. Every Monday I and a group of other volunteers gather at Saint Malachi Church near downtown Cleveland, and help make, serve, and clean up a hot meal for the homeless and poor and less privileged people of the west side Cleveland community, and surrounding areas.

I have come to see firsthand how people are so much the same. Some just have a different existence and need a bit of assistance.

Each person in this world can make a differ-

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The Continuous Battle for Women’s Equality
By Danielle Maus, Regina High School

I am absolutely bewildered by the modern world’s treatment and perspective of women. It is 2016, yet women are still treated as subordinates in some parts of the world. Women are even hindered from receiving a good education or they are not allowed an education at all. They are socially repressed, not represented in politics, and are forced into child marriages.

As a woman in America, this greatly distresses me. Women in America have taken a stand and a new social movement of feminism has begun. Women support other women and demand to be treated with respect in all areas of life. Although challenging here in America, this demand for respect is definitely easier than in other parts of the world. Women in America have freedoms that women in other countries are not entitled to.

Women in other countries are beaten, shunned, tortured, and killed for even speaking out of place. These women are looked down upon as only “objects” and are forced into marriage at a very young age. Their only job is to be a good wife and mother and therefore, they are used and socially repressed.

Opportunities of representation in the policies of a government are null and void. As UNICEF states, “Child marriage often compromises a girl’s development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, interrupting her schooling, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement, and placing her at increased risk of domestic violence.”

Women in America have come a long way in the battle of equality and now they must recognize that they have a responsibility to do something about the way women are treated in other parts of our global world.

Autism
By Ellen Moess, Clare Woods Academy

Hi, my name is Ellen Moess. I have autism and I am from Clare Woods Academy. I would like to just say a few things that I wish people would understand.

I feel like people don’t realize what people with special needs are capable of. They judge us easily on how we look or how we act; they don’t see the real person we are. They think that since that one person is non-verbal that they aren’t smart, but they are so wrong. I feel like in society today they just ignore the help that some special needs adults need; for instance, being rejected from a job just because one is in a wheelchair.

Whatever happened to the saying “treat others as you want to be treated”? I have people come up to me and tell me “I’m sorry you have autism.” I look at them and tell them not to be sorry because autism is my gift that God gave me and it’s what makes me who I am.

We all are unique in our own special ways. I wish society would see that even though we are different we are still human.

The only thing I wish that could happen is that someone made a college for special needs adults; I wish the pay- ment wasn’t high either.

Understanding and Combating Homelessness

ence, as Napoleon Hill said, “If you cannot do great things, do small things in a great way,” and that is exactly what we are doing at Saint Malachi a small portion of our week.

This small amount of work for us results in big things for the people we help. Our organization is doing small things to have a greater impact on those who need compassion and help.
Education for All

By Amber-Nichole Ricks, Trinity High School

High school drop-outs are more than just a statistic. With many more young people leaving school before graduation, this has become a relevant social issue that has far-reaching ramifications. It is often much more complex than a teen not liking school and being unwilling to work hard.

The structure, academic rigor and post-secondary formation opportunities in high schools is one factor. Additional factors that play a role in the incidence of dropping out of school are issues in the home and family structure, social issues such as bullying, and mental and learning challenges of the student.

With such a wide and complicated array of things to consider, choosing where to start reform is difficult.

Several initiatives that have proven successful in some states include professional development for educators and administrators to assist them in making connections between the curriculum taught and the student’s post-secondary aspirations.

Combating bullying and creating a safe and accepting environment is another crucial way schools can alleviate this problem.

Having a strong guidance program and resources for learning differences, along with alternative programs that allow for online learning and project-based and hands-on learning, has shown to be successful in keeping students engaged and allowing them to excel in school.

Trinity High School that I attend really does a great job of putting us on the right path for our future, as well as exposing us to what we can do to make things better for others who are not as fortunate as we are.

While there is much emphasis on schools to take care of this problem, the solution truly needs to incorporate the community and society as well.

After-school and community based programs for youth are often so pivotal in changing the lives of the teens at risk of dropping out of school.

I work at one such place in the Cleveland area. Here the young people are exposed to adults and peers who understand and show compassion but also insist on having them take responsibility for...

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Prejudice

By John J., Clare Woods Academy

In just a few weeks I noticed I was the only person of Mexican descent.

I met this kid. I think his name was Dylan; real tall and buff. Later, when school was dismissed for the day, he saw me strolling down the hall to my locker and started laughing and shouting insults.

Every day at the end of the day this happened, until a year and a half later I told my parents. They got me out of that school and we moved to Illinois where I eventually ended up here at Clare Woods Academy.

I try not to think about it but sometimes I’ll see or hear something that triggers the memories.

I worry not for myself but for others, especially the young, because at a young age you don’t know much about the world that revolves around you and it can be very hard to understand.

As some say “The bad can lead to the worse.”
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We also have resources to assist learners who struggle and have difficulty with acquiring skills and knowledge the traditional way.

I learn so much from those I work with here and from the teens I encounter. The small amount I do, I truly believe makes a difference.

The Effects of Poverty  By Emily Paganes, Regina High School

Poverty exists throughout the world, but what people fail to realize is the effect it has on the people who are living in poverty.

Throughout the years, I have attended multiple sporting events in downtown Detroit. As I walked the streets, I would always see signs people were holding saying, “Homeless and Hungry,” or signs such as, “I have four children, please help.” These signs always had an effect on me as I would read them.

It has been a common theme that homeless people, or those who live in poverty, have done something to get to where they are! People look down upon these men, women, and children and never put themselves into these people’s shoes. I see the homeless differently and I doubt that those who judge these people would not enjoy living on the street, freezing in cold weather, hungry, and afraid.

The constant wonder of when the next meal will be can have a major toll on a person, especially if they are also trying to figure out where to stay for the night. The self-view of someone in this situation will start to turn into hate as hope diminishes.

In Detroit, even people who had homes live in poverty because of a lack of employment or other social and/or medical means.

The city was cutting off water access if owners were unable to pay their water bills. Having water is a basic human right and the fact that families were not allowed to receive this right is inhumane.

No One in our World Should Be Hungry  By Alyssa Brand-Bey, Trinity High School

The statistics on those who do not have enough nutritional food to eat throughout the world is staggering. 42.2 million people live in insecure food households. They either have little to no food or it has such little nutritional value that it is often dangerous. The root of this is economical. People simply do not have enough income for healthy food. It seems unheard of for those with a roof over their head and those who work and go to school to actually go hungry. Yet, a large percentage of those who cannot afford enough food live in developed countries.

The cost of food increases every day due to agricultural and economic factors.

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Education as a Social Justice Issue

By Elena Falcione, Trinity High School

Education is a widespread social justice issue demanding attention from both secular and religious institutions. As most education takes place during the formative years of a person’s life, it is incredibly important to promote a supportive educational environment that fosters positive emotional, academic, and spiritual growth.

Unfortunately, many young people go without the lifelong benefits and increased standard of living provided by a quality, meaningful education. This is a critical issue that can and should be combated for the advancement of the common good of society. With continued advocacy, the education system can be improved to benefit many aspects of our communities.

I have become an active part of the solution to the issue of education through volunteering at my church as a part of the Faith Formation program. As a part of this program, I teach theology to eighth graders. This helps give them perspective on life and fosters self-confidence as they move into their high school years.

The program provides the students with an environment conducive to self-discovery and openness to learning, as well as a foundation in Catholic morals. With this experience, students are better able to be successful as they interact with other students, their families, and their communities. I know because of my wonderful spiritual, academic and social opportunities at Trinity High School how much all this means.

Climate Change

By Megan O’Brien, Regina High School

Climate change is an important issue that affects people, the environment and various economies throughout the world, creating a lack of employment, which leads to unsettling relations in countries.

In past years, climate change was just an idea that was feared and discussed about how to prevent it, but today it is a real problem facing our world, forcing people to adapt their living styles to the weather.

Scientists state that the main cause of this climate change is the greenhouse effect, which is the warming that results when the atmosphere traps heat radiating from Earth toward space (NASA 1).

To show that this problem has become a serious threat, on November 18th, the temperature in Detroit was in the 60’s; on November 20th, it dropped into the 30’s and we saw snow for the first time this year.

This drastic change could greatly impact our environment since no one was prepared for this sudden change in temperature. It definitely affected animals living outside of their habitat and most likely killed some of the animals because of the weather change.

It definitely affected the fishing industry. This could have resulted in causing our country to lose vital food sources which could cause unsettling relations with other countries. Because of our balance of trade other countries depend on our products.

The climate change affects people by limiting them to what they can do in their daily life since it creates a lack of employment.

Climate change has given us very unpredictable temperatures throughout the year. As stated in an
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Unemployment, low income, and the rising cost of living across the board play heavily in the instability of access to affordable and nutritional food.

The largest group affected is children who are often stunted in their growth and develop serious health conditions and diseases. Many young children die from this each year.

As a teen growing up around this, it sickens me and hurts me knowing we are not doing our best as a country and community to help. In researching this as part of my theology class on social justice at Trinity High School, I have become so much more aware of how much we are needed to help change things.

We can do simple things like donate food or help open more food shelters. I volunteer at various food banks and repackage food to be distributed to hunger centers and given to those in need. That does help those in my immediate area but so much more needs to be done. Those who ask for help and come to food banks and shelters are brave. Yet they may need more than just a hot meal.

Not being able to provide for yourself and family can take such an emotional toll. Having people to talk to, who can understand and sympathize is so important. Because not only are they starving, they can be emotionally hurting. Little actions of conversation and the assistance of food can turn into bigger things.

We have to take care of each other. We need to change in our small way what we want changed world-wide. It would be wonderful if our generation, one small act of compassion and charity at a time, could actually put an end to world hunger.

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article by NASA, “Summer temperatures are projected to continue rising, and a reduction of soil moisture which exacerbates heat waves is projected for much of the Western and Central U.S in summer.” (NASA 3).

Reversing the effects of climate change means that each and every person must prioritize and actively work to slow down the increase in the Earth’s temperature.

Becoming more aware of how one uses energy in our daily life, and choosing to support companies that commit to taking climate action is the key to how we can help build a brighter future for our planet.

Message from the Social Justice Committee:

We wish each Sister and Associate a Blessed Christmas and a New Year of 2017 filled with Justice and Peace for our World

REMEmBER...

We welcome your submissions in the form of
- “Sightings”
- Brief write-ups of your activities, “prototypes,” suggestions for workshops, books, articles, films, resources.

Note: The next issue of We Commit Ourselves will be published in February.

Please send any items for inclusion in this next issue to Sister Shannon Fox by January 26th, the last Friday in January.

~ Your Social Justice Committee