Local Student Speaks Out at Statehouse

"In these tough financial times..." this phrase, which was initially alarming, has become the background noise of our lives, thanks to our regular media echo. But the truth is, economic hardship is a very real and many individuals are facing the challenges head-on by trying to prepare for their future.

Sert Mary’s College nursing student and Community resident Sarah Kierka is one of these responsible individuals. Kierka believes that, as with many other aspects of society, a quality education is key. "I feel that the beginning of a great society begins with good education. With a more educated population, many diverse jobs are available, and people tend to be more prosperous with their money," says Kierka.

She recently has demonstrated her commitment to the cause by taking a trip to the Statehouse. Kierka and more than 200 other Harper students traveled to the Capitol with the hope of personally influencing their local representatives. Their mission: call on lawmakers for the continued support of programs that provide financial assistance to aspiring and current college students.

"With the rising cost of tuition and the raising number of people applying for college, last year’s grant money is never enough for the following year," says Kierka. "Like so many others, she already is working two jobs and living on a tight budget, but she still insists on saving funding for a portion of her tuition costs. And she predicts that the general need will grow. "This is a preventative measure. In order to keep the grant amounts what they were for 2008, we need an 11 percent increase in grant funding because of the inflation of college students in Indiana and likely because of the job market shifting toward college graduates."

According to Kierka, the visit was not uneventful as the legislator seemed to truly listen to and agree with the students’ concerns. "I spoke with State Rep. Ryan Draxl, D-South Bend, State Sen. John Bochte, D-South Bend, and State Sen. Joseph Zakura, K-Granger. I told them how important it was for us to continue at Sert Mary’s, and from this could only be made possible through increased funding of student grants. The senators and representatives were very responsive, and some even told about their worries of sending their own children to college in this economy."

The overall response of the officials was encouraging. "I am hopeful because every legislator agreed that this should be a top priority for Indiana’s future. They support us, and are even looking into using the stimulus money," says Kierka.

"For those of us who have never taken part in a group like this, I think we can use our government to advocate for specific programs that benefit the needs of our students," says Kierka. "We need to do more for our students. They are the future of our country."

The students learned the power of face-to-face contact. "We encourage people of all generations to use the power of political involvement for themselves. If you are a high school or college student, take a step down to the Statehouse or apply for an internship. The experience will enrich your life and change the way you look at your senators and representatives," says Kierka. "But even a small step can make a huge difference in the lives of others."

Kierka’s advice? "Write letters. Handwritten letters to your senators and representatives are given much more weight than mass-produced e-mails. Handwritten letters are personal and thank your legislators for what they have done for you as students and parents, and ask them to keep up the good work in the future."