

Education 📖



By Wendall Waters

Gordon College juniors Jennier Sabin, left, and Valerie Long talk to a packed house at Zumi's recently.

Spilling the beans on fair trade

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Wenham -

WENHAM - Gordon College students and faculty gave a presentation earlier this month that up turned into a short seminar on coffee production and fair trade practices. Speaking to an enthusiastic and inquisitive audience of about 35 packed into Zumi's on Market Street in Ipswich, they discussed their recent trip to coffee farms in Guatemala.

Dr. Daniel Johnson co-taught the seminar, of which the trip was a part. In the seminar, he said, students looked at their own participation in the commodity chain and examined

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their own habits of consumption. On the trip to Guatemala, they saw where the consumer cycle of a cash crop, coffee, begins.

Jennifer Sabin and Valerie Long, both juniors who come from southern New Hampshire, showed slides to illustrate how coffee is picked and processed for export and they talked about what it was like to carry heavy sacks of beans down a mountainside.

The students followed two men who worked on a coffee farm. Emilio is 23 and regularly tromps up the mountain to tend to the coffee plants. Angel (pronounced An-hel) is 11 and joins Emilio during school vacation, which runs from November to mid-January to coincide with peak coffee-picking times.

Sabin and Long said they were really excited to go picking alongside Emilio and Angel — until, that is, they had to carry the sacks of beans down the mountain. A fully loaded sack, they said, can weigh 100 pounds. For the students, the experience was a learning adventure. But, for Emilio and Angel, coffee picking is a vital part of their livelihood.

The students were impressed with their skills. They noticed that Emilio and Angel dropped very few beans as they were picking. The same could not be said of the students. While the students struggled to pick 30 pounds of beans, the people who do this day in and day out picked 100 pounds.

Sabin and Long also described how the beans are processed for export. They go through long periods of soaking, drying and sorting, during which the bad beans are picked out by hand. In between, there's lots of hauling, which is done by hand as well. On the small farms, very little is mechanized.

In one of the great ironies of modern consumerism, the students were served Nescafe or some other instant coffee when they visited with farm families. That's because coffee is a cash crop and farmers need to sell as much as they can. They will brew the bad beans, the students explained, for their own consumption.

And, there's the rub.

While farmers get paid little for their long hours of hard labor, the companies that sell the coffee here in the United States make a hefty profit. What do you pay for a pound of coffee in the supermarket? The going rate of pay for a farmer in Guatemala right now is about \$1.31 per pound.

Some 96 percent of the coffee produced in the world, Daniel Johnson said, is traded in the traditional way. For every \$1 of coffee, 84 cents winds up in the hands of companies in the consumer nation. Only 16 cents stays in the producing country and is divided among the laborers, farm owners and exporters.

Fair trade farmers get a little more, perhaps \$1.51 per pound. These farmers are hooked into a network of buyers who are committed to shortening the supply chain between

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producer and consumer. The idea is to reduce the number of times the coffee changes hands so the farmers get a bigger piece of the pie.

Umesh Bhuju, who co-owns and operates Zumi's with his wife, Zillie, sells only fair trade and organic coffee. Zumi's does business with Dean's Bean's and the owner of Dean's gets coffee directly from farmers. The Bhujus are committed to the concept of fair trade and spend their off time spreading the word.

People are catching on, **Bhaju** said, and demand for fair trade coffee is growing.

"But it's probably going to take time," he said.

Jennifer Sabin said the students came back from the trip with even more than an understanding of the inequities in the coffee trade.

"It has prompted us to examine other things in our lives," she said.

Sabin said many people in the United State just don't see the production side of the items they consume. The trip, she said, helped the students be mindful of where things come from.

The audience peppered the students and faculty with questions about the nitty-gritty of fair trade and organic practices and how Americans can get involved. And, some jumped in to explain what they are doing.

Ipswich resident Jo-Alice Stockwell said members of her congregation, the First Presbyterian on County Road, wanted to buy fair trade coffee so they pitched in the extra money the church would need to purchase it.

Kirk McClelland, who works in the chapel office at Gordon College, said that while not all farmers in the areas the group visited are on board with organic and/or fair trade, the difference in the coffee plants was remarkable. The plants on the organic farms, he said, were so much more lush than those on the traditional farms.

Johnson summed things up by saying that while there is no global solution to the inequities in the coffee trade, the fair trade movement does a great job at pushing the discussion.