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Protester "desperate" for change

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This week, Theresa Cusimano went to Washington to celebrate the inauguration of a president she hopes will mend our country.

Next week, she faces trial for protesting the policies she believes broke it.

"It wasn't working for me to be a silent bystander to torture and human- rights abuses. I needed to cross the line," says the director of a student group based at Regis University.

Civil disobedience doesn't come lightly to Cusimano, 40, who figured her main act of dissent had passed at age 7 when she pushed her way onto a boys' baseball team in protest that girls didn't have one of their own.

Then last year, she glanced up at a TV screen at Denver International Airport and noticed a photo of a prisoner being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

"It moved me to tears, feeling so desperate about our country's direction," she recalls.

She took action in November by joining a group of 26 Regis students and staffers on a trip to Fort Benning, Ga.

Regis and other Jesuit universities long have protested the Army base over the killings of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador in 1989. Some of the killers had attended Fort Benning's School of the Americas, now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Peace activists want to shutter the school for allegedly using U.S. tax dollars to promote torture and human-rights abuses in Latin America.

Fort Benning officials deny that such training was offered on base.

"That's absurd," says spokesman Lee Rials.

But as Cusimano sees it, the school is part of a continuum that led the government more recently to hold foreign prisoners without due process, torture them and further erode America's moral standing by trying to justify those policies legally.

After a weekend teach-in among Jesuits, she met up with five other peace activists on Nov. 22 and started marching toward Fort Benning, carrying a small white cross. The group was stopped along a highway by civilian police, was arrested by military guards and will face trial on trespassing charges in a federal court in Georgia on Monday.

Since the 1989 "Jesuit Massacre," 270 activists have been arrested and served more than 90 years for protesting the school.

Cusimano faces up to six months behind bars.

Regis supports her and plans a prayer vigil as her trial begins Monday. The university also is trying to persuade Congress to shut down WHISC.

"It's part of a larger call to conscience when our government is engaged in acts that run completely counter to human dignity," says university vice president Tom Reynolds.

Backing also comes from the Colorado Campus Compact, a group of 34 colleges that Cusimano directs in promoting civic involvement among students.

"I think the message for students is you have to do what speaks to your heart," says Compact chair Bette Matkowski, president of Johnson & Wales University's campus in Denver. "In many ways, I wish I had the same courage that she has."

Cusimano admits she's "scared" by the likelihood that she'll lose her case before a judge who has shown little mercy to protesters.

Standing on the National Mall in our nation's capital Tuesday, she said she was buoyed by President Barack Obama​'s call to "reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals" and that "those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expediency's sake."

"I'm hoping we finally have a president who gets it," she says. "I'm hoping next year there's no more torture to protest and no reason to go back to Fort Benning."

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