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Peaceful protest as Saint Mary's College brings students and staff together

By Lou Fancher

Clashes between pro-Palestinian students and leaders of colleges and universities across the United States have made the headlines for months. Several protest demonstrations over the Israel-Gaza war have resulted in suspensions, arrests, forceful closure of encampments, and violent interactions between police, students, and outside demonstrators. Students in chapters of organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace are demanding academic institutions call for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, disclose financial investments-and, in some cases, academic links-to Israel, and divest of all investments associated with arms suppliers or other companies profiting from the war.

All too often what is missing from the headlines are the stories of what has happened at college campuses like Saint Mary's College in Moraga. On the evening of May 16, approximately 20 Saint Mary's students held vigil around a De La Salle statue memorial recognizing Palestinian children killed after the Hamas invasion of Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. Students then began a peaceful occupation of the nearby chapel, including seven students who began a hunger strike. Among them was the peaceful sit-in's co-organizer Jacob Machnik, a student with the SMC chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine. He is an ethnic studies major and graduated May 25, along with the rest of the 2024 undergraduate class.

"We began with the vigil and sit-in Wednesday night and it was early Thursday morning that an administrator came in to request an opportunity to meet with us," Machnik said in an interview. "We sent back a request to meet with the provost and they responded immediately. By that second night, we were in negotiations."

Executive Vice President and Provost Corey Cook in a separate interview described the first interactions: "To be honest, my greatest concern was the hunger strike, not the political pressure. We were headed into finals and graduation. I needed them to eat, to get a good night's sleep. Importantly, we didn't need them to harm themselves to get our attention." Reflecting on what stood out about the conversations held Thursday evening, Cook said, "They voiced their concerns about what's going on in the world, they showed they were engaged and advocated and were committed. Whether or not an individual agreed with their concerns, they took a stand and we were impressed by that. If a group of students came with a different position on the conflict in Gaza or with concerns about another issue, I'd greet them with the same approach. It's part of what we do: we listen to students."

The students' three demands included reaching an agreement not to remove the De La Salle statue memorial during graduation ceremonies, disclosure of financial investments, and divestment from all corporations complicit in Israeli war crimes, as stated in the Student Power Coalition's Calls for Change. The negotiations involved all of the students who had engaged in the protests, a faculty witness, and senior representatives of the administration, including Cook.

"The negotiations were mostly straightforward," recalled Machnik. "The stickiest part was not what I expected. The college didn't want to leave up the memorial. I had expected the hardest part would be the divestment demand. But it was important to have the memorial because up until that point, there had been no space created on campus to acknowledge the Palestinian lives lost. It was a space for Palestinian students to see their struggles reflected. We were told a number of things about why they would remove it. After an official announcement went out saying just that it would be removed, we were told they were worried it would get destroyed. Then that it would interfere with graduation photos."

Ultimately, discussions during the negotiations centered on erecting a more permanent memorial and led to a solution. "The temporary memorial was removed, but part of our agreement with administration is that we will work after commencement to create a more lasting, enduring memorial," said Machnik.

Cook says among the issues presented by the students were decisions the administration could make-such as planning a permanent memorial-and decisions about disclosures and divestitures that fell under the Board of Trustees purview. His primary objective and guiding principle during the discussion was to "be professorial," he said. "My job in the classroom is to learn from students and teach them at the same time. I'm not telling them what's right. My job as provost was to guide them and help them to figure out where to take their concerns. If you want to memorialize the children killed in Gaza, what's the best way to do that? The discussion was like a seminar. From the first evening, the relationship with the students was open and collaborative."

Cook assured the students they would be able to meet with the board and present their requests for disclosure and disinvestment. "They understood the board would require a meeting before taking action and worked with me to bring a presentation to them that suggested the creation of a task force."

The task force will look at the investment portfolio with the initial purpose to make Saint Mary's social responsibility policy more transparent. It was created in the 1980s and guides the college's endowment investments. Cook said, "We thought it was great and we started with common ground, even on the things that weren't actionable immediately. I told the students that if at any point they didn't feel we were responsive, go back on strike. We weren't negotiating, we were working together to make the college a better place."

Machnik said the proposed task force will be made up of students, faculty, staff, administration, and a representative from the Board of Trustees. "We have assurances from the senior provost that the board is open to granting full disclosure. We asked the task force review investments and work toward policies that address divesting of investments in violent and oppressive systems. To ensure their response to our

requests isn't performative, the administration must continue to support our proposals. Divestment can't happen unless all parties remain committed and involved. I'm confident because the people in the negotiations were sympathetic to our position and there was a sense they wanted to work with us peacefully to resolve the issues."

Asked about reasons the demonstration at Saint Mary's avoided some of the pitfalls that occurred on other campuses, Cook mentions "not being a massive public university" and not having outside protesters who have initiated violent confrontations at other locations. "That engagement of our staff, faculty, and students was also different because we know each other. Our community is small: there wasn't a student I didn't recognize from some interaction I've had on campus. They asked how they could trust us and I said because you are our students. The last thing in the world we would do is stop paying attention to you. Our job is to listen to you, to make sure you're seen and heard."

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