

## NOT TOO YOUNG TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Zoe Martin-West, University of Leeds

Published March 2007



Zoe Martin-West with an LBL postcard

*Whilst growing up in Cornwall, Zoe Martin-West's parents taught her the value of living an ethical lifestyle. Even as a child, she recognized the impacts of human activity on the natural environment. She's carried on that concern after moving to Leeds for university.*

Having been brought up with environmentally-friendly habits, she's keen to keep them going, especially away from home. "At university, we have the option for the recycling bin so I thought we should get one, because we throw an awful lot away as a flat. Now we have one and we make a conscious effort to recycle. It's an automatic thing – we know what to recycle and where it has to go."

In addition to recycling the waste at her flat, the 18-year-old English student also tries to avoid using the plastic carrier bags that seem to come with every purchase. "You're given a plastic bag in every shop, instead of having one shopping bag. Why do we have so many shopping bags, why can't we have one bag? It's a bit ridiculous."

But it's not just the environment that she's concerned about. Now Zoe's interest stretches past her local surroundings and into locations overseas. Supporting development organisations like Oxfam, she's become concerned about the environment of others, particularly those she might affect herself through her purchasing decisions.

During her last year in high school, Zoe was impressed by a visit of a representative from the organisation Labour Behind The Label (LBL). After hearing the LBL representative talk about garment workers toiling away in cramped factories for wages as low as a few pence per hour, she decided to do something about it. “The representative didn’t tell a group of teenage girls to stop shopping,” explains Zoe. “It was more reasonable. You can shop at H&M or the Gap, but you should be aware of what you’re buying and how it was made.”

**“I’ve been doing the postcards whilst at university, and people ask me about it, and a lot of people say ‘Oh gosh, I didn’t realize.’ There are a lot of people who aren’t aware of the conditions of producing the clothes that people buy.”**

*Zoe Martin-West*

Whilst she still shops on the high street, she now takes the time to follow LBL’s Take A Stand campaign for workers’ rights. After bringing her purchases home, she sends her receipts with a pre-printed Take A Stand postcard to the head offices of the shops she’s visited. “It’s very easy because you just fill in the postcard, attach the receipt, and send the postcard. It’s very obvious, it’s direct action.”

Zoe credits her upbringing and her conscience for her ethical stance. “I think part of it came from my parents, but obviously if I hadn’t wanted to be ethical with my shopping habits, I could’ve just stopped when I came to university. I think what your parents do is important, but now I carry it on myself.”

Through discussions with friends, Zoe does her part to talk about climate change and environmental issues, and she sees that she’s getting through to some of them. “Everyone seems to think that I’m really keen on it and they tease me, but I’m not prepared to step down over it. I think people know that they need to change the way we act and our disposable lifestyle. When the public decide that they want to change, then they pressurize the state or businesses for the change.”

Next on her wishlist is better labeling and packaging for clothing and food, in order to raise awareness about the issues of working conditions and food miles. Zoe doesn’t think many people know about them. “I would make it compulsory for clothing to have labels that say something about how it was made, I’d make sure food had less packaging and say something about recycling it, so there’s no excuse, they have to take responsibility for their actions.”

Though Zoe hasn’t planned a career in saving the world, she still feels she could be more active and involved. “In terms of writing to companies and reading up on environmental impact, I think it’s important that I continue to find out more about it, but it’s a matter of time and finding the time to act.”

“It’s just something you do. If you’re interested in it and you can make a difference, then hopefully you can.”

## Facts and Information

- Low prices don't just prevent suppliers being able to pay their workers a living wage, they also have a detrimental effect on other basic rights such as sick or maternity leave, health and safety, reasonable working hours and the right to organise. (*Source: Labour Behind The Label*)
- In Bangladesh, garment sector wages have fallen in real terms by half in the past ten years, as low as £7 per month (*Source: Labour Behind The Label*)
- Labour costs typically represent something between 0.5 and 4% of the retail price of a garment or sports shoe. For instance, paying Indonesian sport shoe workers a living wage would raise the cost of a \$65 pair of sport shoes to \$70. (*Source: Labour Behind The Label*)

## Further Resources

- For more information about Labour Behind The Label or the Take A Stand postcards, visit [www.labourbehindthelabel.org](http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org)