

NARRATOR

(Jane) A few days before MSU school year starts, a student named Jack enters Maverick bookstore on campus.

Molly, the assistant manager at the store, approaches him.

SCENE 1

(Renee) Molly: “Can I help you find anything.”

(Doug) Jack: “I’m looking at MSU sweatshirts. This one has an A on the label and mentions someone by name as having made the sweatshirt. What is that all about?”

(Renee) Molly: Oh that is one of our most popular sweatshirts. The A stands for the factory that made the sweatshirt, Alta Gracia. It is in the Dominican Republic. The name, Yenny, is the person who made it. Are you familiar with Alta Gracia?

(Doug) Jack: No I’m not.

(Renee) Molly: Well let me tell you the story. It was the first clothing factory certified Fair Trade and sweat free in the Dominican Republic. It is an inspiration to the world because *its model disproves the myth that clothing companies have to be sweatshops or they won’t be able to compete in the global brand clothing market.*

(Doug) Jack: I must say you have piqued my interest. I have always been told that Sweatshops are better than nothing and a necessary early stage of economic development. Clothing companies say sweatshops have to be endured because they are the only alternative to no job. They justify it by saying future generations will have improved conditions but for now they at least have a job.

(Renee) Molly: Well the real truth is a few powerful clothing brands have all the control in setting the price they pay sweatshop owners. They force factories to sell their clothing at lower and lower prices. The sweatshop owners have no choice but to exploit their workers because the clothing companies put pressure on them to lower their wages any way they can to remain competitive. The factory workers are the biggest losers, forced to accept poor pay and terrible working conditions because they have no alternative.

(Doug) Jack: Thanks for explaining that to me... Honestly, it’s hard to hear about this... Now tell me about this woman whose name is on this sweatshirt.

SCENE 2

(Christi) Yenny: My name is on your sweatshirt. I came to MSU to tell my story of how my life was transformed from a living hell to a kind of heaven when I went from working at BJ & B to Alta Gracia. BJ & B was a Korean company producing Nike and Reebok hats. When they went bankrupt, a sportswear company called Knight sportswear took over.

My first job there, when it was still BJ & B, was when I was 14 and already had a child. I thought to myself, working for a clothing factory can't be that bad can it? Well I found out it was worse than I ever dreamed. My factory floor supervisor would scream and throw boxes at me if I didn't learn fast enough. I worked really hard and surpassed his quotas because I needed this job so badly to provide for my child. The heat was unbearable and all of us workers were on our feet long hours, often working more than 12 hours a day. Workers who were sick or had a family emergency were not allowed to leave the work floor. I watched as one of my co-workers who was pregnant went into labor prematurely on the work floor and was not allowed to seek medical help. She had a miscarriage at her station. Supervisors of new women hires would often punch them in the stomach to make sure they were not pregnant.

But the most frightening part of my job was working overtime without prior notice, -- sometimes I worked 23 hours with only 4 hours off. I would become distraught if the overtime hours reached too late into the night because the person taking care of my child would have to leave and my little girl would be left alone. Once I became so panicked, I tried to escape out the back stair case but the supervisor grabbed me back to work. It wouldn't have mattered anyway because the doors were always locked so we couldn't leave. Then when we were finally allowed to leave, public transit was no longer running so I would have to walk home, always fearing in the back of my mind that I might be raped or robbed. I had heard of that happening to workers.

I struggle now to keep back the tears when I think about how I missed my daughter's childhood because I would get up at 5:30 to make breakfast before she was awake, had to be at work at 6:45 and didn't get back home until after 9:00 p.m. or even later when she was already asleep.

I thought I would at least be able to provide for her but my wages were so low that we sometimes didn't have enough to eat and I couldn't afford to take her to the clinic when she was sick. Like the other mothers at the factory, I was always

worrying about having to borrow from loan sharks to pay for food and rent. The clothing companies and factories justify low wages by saying that women are just supplementing their husband's income but this is not true.

When we tried to unionize and better our work conditions, some of us were beaten up and we were all fired, and that led to the factory being closed -- which was devastating. *Some of us became so desperate we thought about trying to immigrate illegally to Puerto Rico to find work to feed our children...*

But then a miracle happened; a sportswear company called Knight sportswear bought the factory and reopened it.

SCENE 3

(T.J.) Joe: I, Joe Bozich, am the CEO of Knights of Apparel, the top producer of university apparel. I founded my own company and built it into a \$300 million enterprise and the largest supplier of apparel to colleges around the country. My life was going great until a series of personal tragedies happened. I lost people I loved -- and on top of that I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. That's when I started to reexamine my life and realized that I wanted to do something more valuable than make huge profits... I became aware of the fact that I was able to get through life crises because I had the resources to get the best medical care, pay my bills and take time off work. I realized that most people, namely those working in clothing factories making clothes for my company, didn't have these resources... I knew I had to do something that would have a big impact on the people's lives that worked for my clothing factories. So I paired up with Scott Nova, the executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium.

(Jim) Scott: I'm Scott, and I run The Worker Rights Consortium. You might say we are the David to the apparel industry's Goliath. We try to hold multibillion-dollar corporations accountable for the conditions in their many supply chain factories that they source their clothing from...

How our nonprofit came to be goes back to consumers and students on campus having growing awareness of sweatshops. They started to demand that clothing with their school logo must come from factories that have better pay and work conditions. Campuses formed the United Students Against Sweatshops and started demanding disclosures of where clothing companies were sourcing their clothing. Students also formed an alliance with labor and human rights groups to found the Worker Rights Consortium that I run. We serve as an independent monitor of clothing factories. We report violations and put pressure on clothing companies to correct poor work conditions. We have power to stop university contracts with clothing companies that don't uphold labor standards.

I actually met Joe when I had to report labor abuses in one of his factories. When I called to tell him, I expected the usual battle and reaction of excuses like feigned ignorance and surprise or sneaky avoidance or outright lies. Instead I got a most unexpected response from Joe: that he would look into the violations immediately and correct them. And he did. We got to know each other better over the next few months and started dreaming about what it would take to create a model anti-sweatshop factory. And the more we talked, the more excited we got about this idea.

After much research, Joe picked the closed BJ & B factory -- the two of us reopened it and we set up the 4 pillars of labor standards: Living wage, freedom of association, fair hiring and full transparency.

(T.J.) Joe: We formed a partnership and named the company Alta Gracia. Scott and I hired staff who believed in this commitment to fair and humane labor standards. The first manager we hired promised he would commit to these standards also. But when push came to shove, he couldn't bear to give up his position of power to work with the unions. It was too difficult so he quit.

We hired a team to calculate what would be a living wage by costing out the products necessary to provide the basics of health care, food, education and housing. *A living wage is different from the legal minimum wage.* The workers made a living wage of \$2.83 an hour versus the minimum wage of 83 cents. That was a huge difference for the workers standard of living but only added \$1.00 to the cost of producing a sweatshirt. We are so proud of the fact that our clothing factory was revolutionary in the clothing industry.

We worked closely with the union. The union had equal partnership with managers so they could sit down together to make decisions about the work place instead of fighting each other. The Worker Rights Consortium was invited to visit anytime to inspect the work floor. I was involved in all negotiations so I would have to agree to fair pricing.

SCENE 4

(Christi) Yenny: I knew something was different about this factory when I first found out Alta Gracia was accepting applications and I applied for a job. I noticed that union activists like myself and pregnant women were not automatically eliminated and that politically favored people were not given preferential treatment. Instead of waiting all day in long lines in the hot sun, I was given a specific appointment time to return for interviews.

When I was hired and started working there, I thought I was in a dream and would soon wake up to harsh reality...

Besides the living wage, the factory offers education and wellness programs. They even have a grant and loan program so workers don't have to borrow money from loan sharks. Union and management have monthly meetings to resolve health and safety issues. Good ventilation and lighting, ergonomic chairs, a suggestion box, free reporting of labor problems with no retribution, bathroom breaks, paid sick leave and vacation time, no lay-offs when business is slow. I thought I had died and gone to the big clothing factory in heaven... No more worrying about my children. I have flexibility to take time off if I have a family emergency and can not be forced to work overtime. The company shares their financial status with workers telling them the exact costs and expenses to run the business. Because of our improved work conditions and pay, we have much lower turnover of 5% versus 50 to 60 % in sweatshops. Our productivity is much higher as well because of our better health, less worries and greater commitment to the factory's success. We work as a team and help workers who are not working up to speed to increase their productivity. We are so committed to the success of our factory.

Our whole community has also thrived with new businesses springing up because we have enough money to buy basics.

SCENE 5

(Renee) Molly: Yes, paying workers a living wage adds about \$1.00 to the cost of a sweatshirt that clothing companies will sell to the consumer for \$35.00. But clearly retailers and brand name companies could pay contract factories a slightly higher price to cover a living wage without putting much of a dent in their profit margins. The rise in cost would still be less than 4% of the final \$35.00 price of the sweatshirt.

(Doug) Jack: So what happened to you, Yenny?

(Christi) Yenny: I became a union leader and advocate for Alta Gracia and for ending sweatshops. I travel far and wide telling consumers and stores my story of transformation from extreme hardship to a fulfilling life. The clothing factory motto is “Life changing apparel”

(Doug) Jack: So have clothing companies changed their practices because of Alta Gracia? And what can I do to help them change?

(Renee) Molly: The majority of clothing factories are still sweatshops and brand name companies still try to squeeze every penny from their factories. The one way to change all that is for you, the consumer, to put pressure on these companies. We need to insist that they do the right thing...

As people of privilege, we have the power to force clothing companies to commit to providing humane and safe conditions and pay a living wage. Alta Gracia teaches us that sub-poverty wages and terrible work conditions for the 50 million apparel workers in the global economy are not a necessary evil...

And we can choose differently, with fair trade on our minds and hearts: The beauty of buying Fair Trade products is that the more people buy them, the more the price goes down. Take coffee – the most widely purchased Fair Trade product. Because so many people buy fair trade coffee, the lower shipping costs allow the price to be sometimes even lower than other gourmet coffees. Cub Fair Trade brand costs \$6.99 for 10 ounces which is less than some other non fair trade brands. Target Mankato now sells Fair Trade jeans at \$25.00 a pair. That is cheaper than some of their non Fair Trade jeans. And Fair Trade products are comparable to high quality non Fair Trade products.

(Doug) Jack: The only Fair Trade I have heard about is coffee and chocolate. You have pointed out clothing too. Are there any more Fair Trade products?

(Renee) Molly: Good Heavens yes. There are hundreds of Fair Trade products, like: quinoa, wine, fruits, vegetables and spices and more -- at Hy Vee, the Coop -- there's even Ben and Jerry's ice cream. And there are flowers, musical instruments, children's toys and jewelry. You can find these handmade crafts at Minneapolis 10,000 Villages, St. Peter Fair Emporium, New Ulm's Own and Mountain Lake's Care and Share...

These products are high quality products -- fair traders have received awards at the international Cup of Excellence and Roaster of the Year competitions, Great Taste awards, Sustainability in Design and Best Organic Textile Awards, innovative artwork awards and many others...

When Fair Trade producers receive a little extra money on each product they sell they put it in a community development fund, and that fund helps them invest in technology and education to improve the quality of their products. Farmers receive training in agricultural best practices and invest in new technology to improve quality. This investment in turn helps them grow their business.

(Doug) Jack: So I am starting to understand more what Fair Trade is. I think those who say fair trade is a charity are mistaken.

(Renee) Molly: You are right. The old expression, "trade not aid" explains the Fair Trade system in a nutshell. Fair Trade businesses don't want handouts. They want to improve their lives by making a decent living. Though of course, Fair Trade organizations do support charitable projects in addition to their work.

(Doug) Jack: Thank you, Molly. I have learned a lot from our discussion. I will look for Fair Trade products and support this valuable system. As Paul Wellstone once said "We all do better when we all do better."