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# Fasting from Jeans, for a Cause

Joya Breems

**December 15, 2021**

Every year, I spend November reveling in pants, the crispy feel of denim skinny jeans, the smooth fabric of a legging gripping my calf muscles. I notice how thankful I am for pants because I will be giving them up—fasting from them, so to speak, for the next month. This is the seventh year that I have participated in “Dressember,” an awareness campaign against human trafficking, in which participants wear a dress or tie each day of the December month. Dressember’s mission is to create a world where all people are free. Along with the style challenge, Dressember advocates raise money which is used to support anti-trafficking ventures throughout the world.

My first encounter with human trafficking as a social issue was through the book *Sold* by Patricia McCormick, where the author told the story of a girl sold into sex slavery. That story broke my heart for the plight of the poor who are sold into sex or labor trafficking, but as a mere eighth grader, I felt powerless to address the problems that loomed so largely. I was also aghast that I had never heard of the issue before, and as tends to happen, my passion spilled over into a need for action.

Around that time, the *Sioux Center News* published an article about a classmate a few years older than I wearing a dress during December to raise awareness for human trafficking. Immediately, I knew I was in. I clipped around the article and hung it on our fridge, waiting to show my mom when she got home. Together, we embarked on the adventure of Dressember.

Dressember in Iowa involves being smart with layers to protect yourself from the chilling wind and biting cold. As someone who loves fashion, this part of the challenge appealed greatly to me. I enjoy mixing and matching various thrifted dresses and cardigans in my closet and coming up with fun combinations. After the first week, that thrill wore off and there I was: cold, missing my jeans, and still not feeling more connected to those I was advocating for. After all, a little eighth grader wearing a dress doesn’t do much to help victims of human trafficking.

My mom helped me frame the issue differently. Dressember is like fasting, except it occurs during advent rather than lent. Physically, we’re fasting from jeans, but spiritually, we’re fasting for the sake of the poor. Whenever the thoughts of “I’m uncomfortable,” or “I wish I could wear something else right now,” creep into my head, I banish them with prayers for the poor. An unofficial slogan that my family coined is “*When I dress with dignity, I pray for those whose dignity has been taken away.*” This slogan helps me connect my dress-wearing with the larger

issue. When I put on my dress each morning, I can be thankful for the options available to me—such as having the choice over what I wear—and pray for those that do not have the same freedom.

Praying for those without dignity does not only have to apply to those who are trafficked—it includes praying for the elderly man in a nursing home who is unable to dress himself in the morning. It includes the two young girls in a hotel lobby staring at the floor in scanty clothing, or the young women of Asian descent working at a local nail salon, who are transported from a bigger city to work each day. These are all people that I have interacted with, and I wear my dress for them. I pray for them.

Participating in Dresseember has a ripple effect. A dress is a conversation starter, and conversations are the foundation of social change. Throughout the month, Dresseember participants tend to get a lot of questions about *why* they're wearing a dress. These questions are the perfect opportunity to educate my friends about the issues of human trafficking and to do more research for myself. Since I started participating in Dresseember, my brothers, cousins, and friends have all joined me. My brother's eye doctor asked why he was wearing a tie, and it allowed him to share about the local effects of trafficking. This year, the Dordt Social Work department is also participating in Dresseember. <sup>1</sup> It has been uplifting to have a community of advocates on campus, so that we can share our struggles with both layering and motivation. As it turns out, trafficking is an issue that intersects with many other social factors such as race, class, and gender.

Fasting during advent is a way to prepare ourselves for the feast of Christmas to come. It is also countercultural, especially as the secular holiday season promotes consumerism, discontent, and frenzy. These things are completely antithetical to the Christmas message that Jesus came to the world as a humble child, surrounded by lowly Shepherds who probably wouldn't have cared much about Black Friday deals. Jesus came as a person filled with grace and truth, and he came to liberate us from our sin. When I wear my dress during December, it helps me to think beyond myself and the Christmas consumerism I am all too tempted to indulge in. On New Year's, I will be wearing jeans, and my heart will be refreshed. We pray. We fast. We wait for all things to be made new. Immanuel: come, Lord Jesus.

You can find out more at this link: <https://dresseember2021.funraise.org/team/dordt-social-work>