A simple letter can make a huge difference with local Amnesty chapter



By Kinjal Dagli Shah

The Aurora/Newmarket Amnesty Group came together at the Aurora Public Library on Saturday to host their Write for Rights letter-writing event as part of the Library's ongoing One Book One Aurora program.

In the background, children enjoyed story time, paper origami and button-making as the weekend visitors learned more about Amnesty International and how a simple letter can make a huge difference.

Heather Cooper, who has been a member of the local chapter since it started in 2006, was running the event along with other members.

?This year, the library has chosen Sweetness in the Belly, a book that ties in with human rights, so they offered us a chance to partner with them today. As a group, we don't focus on fundraising but on making people aware of Amnesty International and what it does,? she said.

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million people in over 150 countries who campaign to end abuses of human rights and is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

Jason, a resident of Vaughan and a member of the local chapter, was at the event with three of his four children.

?A surprising number of people haven't heard of Amnesty International and are content being here in Canada without realizing what is happening in the outside world. At Amnesty, one of the things we work on is

Urgent Action cases where someone is facing an unfair trial, are being interrogated or have gone missing. Each month, we write letters to the authorities in question and say, politely, that we are from Canada and we have heard from research what is happening to a particular individual in jail. We ask the authorities to investigate and we are told that the most effective means of persuading government officials is the handwritten letter,? explained Jason, whose work as a scientist took him to various parts of the world.

?During my travel, I was forced to come face-to-face with the fact that other countries don't have the same laws and standards as Canada and some of my colleagues don't have the same hopes and dreams that I do. I had a few close calls with customs in different countries and realized that things can escalate pretty quickly. I felt I had an obligation to try to do something about it and many years later, I found the Amnesty group in Aurora.?

While his 11-year-old daughter Mary guided the little ones in button-making, his son Andrew was helping make origami cranes and doves.

?I volunteered with my dad last year at the One Book, One Aurora event and I think it's important to help people in jail because they should have freedom too. It's not fun to be trapped in prison,? said Mary, who usually spends her weekend morning running with her family but chose to volunteer for the Amnesty group on this particular Saturday.

Amnesty International has a program called Lifesaver for youth ages 9-14 where they too are able to write simple letters. ?Jason has a young family so he integrated the children's programming along with the letter-writing event today,? said Heather. Aurora resident Elmer Berbudez brought his kids for the StoryTime at the library and took home some information about Amnesty International. ?My kids participated in the activity and a lady here oriented me on how the organization works. I was happy to learn about it.?

It was a win-win Saturday for all.

The Aurora/Newmarket Amnesty group meets the second Thursday of the month from 7 to 8.30 pm in the Rectory House behind the Trinity Anglican Church in Aurora. Anyone is welcome to attend.