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Keeping the flame burning for human rights victims, one letter at a time



By Brock Weir

Amnesty International's symbol of a candle wrapped in barbed wire has become synonymous over the years in efforts to underscore human rights abuses around the world.

Next week, however, local activists will be keepers of the flame in special events held around International Human Rights Day.

These aren't your typical activists of waving protest signs or taking to the streets, they know the power of the pen and will put it into force next Sunday, December 8, for Write for Rights 2013, an event writing cards to human rights defenders around the world. This year's ?writeathon? will take place at Trinity Anglican Church from 2 ? 4 p.m.

?The idea is to shed a light on things that go on in the world,? says Heather Cooper, a member of the Aurora-Newmarket chapter of Amnesty International. ?There is nothing more discouraging than a prisoner of conscience being told by their captors that nobody knows about them or cares where they are.?

Countries want to ?look good? in the public eye and oftentimes they respond to pressure, she adds. If someone is sentenced to death in just weeks, one has to respond quickly, but sometimes there is room for a good old-fashioned letter.

?You get a bag of 100 letters dumped on your desk, and you have to do something with them,? says Ms. Cooper. ?Electronically, you can just hit delete.?

Ms. Cooper, a retired high school teacher, always heard about Amnesty International growing up, but was motivated to make that next step and actually join after meeting a single parent in Aurora who, despite the challenges she was going through herself, still found time to support the cause.

?That person could have been totally caught up in their own day-to-day problems, but they were able to look at the big picture,? she says.

She connected with the local Amnesty ?Action Circle? in 2006 and since then they have welcomed people from across York and Durham Regions. Sometimes she says she believes Amnesty International is a difficult group to attract new members because they tackle ?some pretty tough issues,? like people being tortured or imprisoned in inhumane conditions, and there is no end to cases around the world.

On the other hand, part of the appeal to her is they are not a political group, they are neutral, and firmly grounded in universal principles of human rights.

Through monthly meetings, they focus on three or four ?Action cases?. Last month it was a matter of two activists at risk of being flogged in Sudan. Materials provided by Amnesty give backgrounders, the names, information on what they have been up to, as well as three or four talking points to mention in letters.

There is also the all-important contact information to make sure your voices reach the right ears.

?They have found in a third of the cases Amnesty takes on, there will be some kind of positive change,? says Ms. Cooper. ?It might be someone in prison who is able to get a lawyer, or they might be put in a better cell, or receive medical attention.

?We always write politely and respectfully. We don't have a political agenda. We're just saying under internationally accepted human rights laws there has been a violation and something must be done.?

At next Sunday's ?writeathon?, seven or eight cases will be presented to the group and members of the public who want to come out and lend their voices. This time there will be a personal touch in writing non-denominational apolitical cards to prisoners.

?Imagine if you have been shut in a cell for years and then you get these cards from around the world,? she says. ?The first one I did was very meaningful. The event is for anybody, any age, any sex or religion.?