

A democracy is only as good as its citizens: author



By Brock Weir

If politicians are doing badly, is there really anyone to blame but the humble voter?

That is the question bestselling author Marina Nemat posed to a packed house at the Aurora Public Library on Saturday as hundreds of Aurorans fanned out throughout the community to take part in Culture Days 2014.

Bringing together efforts from the Library, the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Aurora Farmers' Market, Aurora Historical Society, and Theatre Aurora, the Aurora Cultural Roundtable planned a jam packed day to appeal to all the senses, from cooking demonstrations to Town Park to a celebration of Persian Culture on Church Street.

While elsewhere provided a feast for the eyes, the presentation of Ms. Nemat, an Aurora resident and author of *Prisoner of Tehran*, provided plenty of food for thought as she discussed the value of having a voice ? and using your voice ? in a thriving democracy.

It is a value Ms. Nemat knows first-hand. As a teen growing up in Iran, she was arrested in the early 1980s for her writing, which took on a political edge. There, she was continually tortured and living under a death sentence.

?In prison, I had hundreds of cellmates and these young men and women were the cream of the crop in Iran,? she said. ?They were all the top students, they were all the young people who wanted to make Iran a better place. Revolutions always promise the people freedom and democracy. That is a basic human need, but that is not what many revolutions, including the Iranian one, deliver to the people.?

Before the revolution, Ms. Nemat said she spent her teen years as most kids of the day did ? hanging out at the beach with friends, watching shows like *Donnie & Marie*, and the youth were taken with the idea of promises for equality for all. But that is not what they got.

?The people of Iran voted 98 per cent to become an Islamic Republic but the problem was they had no idea what it was because the laws of this Islamic Republic had not been written. The words Islamic and Republic had not been put into one phrase ever. Now we are more familiar with the concept.?

Horror, she said, does not happen overnight, but rather little by little, and if those living in democracies aren't careful, this too could happen to them.

?The average citizen is too busy going to work, making their mortgage and car payments, arguing with their teenagers, and they don't see what is going on until it is too late,? she said. ?By then, if you open your mouth, someone could put a gun to your head and pull the trigger. If we think we are immune to the likes of [dictators], please think again.

?In this beautiful, democratic country of Canada, we have another election coming up ? this on a municipal election. Yes, we live in a democracy, and yes, we have a say, but do we all use our vote? If we do, is it an informed, educated vote? Let's not forget, please, that people voted for Hitler. Democracy, even though it is the best system that we have is only as good as every one of the citizens of the country. Our Canadian democracy is as good as every single one of us. So, let's say we make the wrong choice, who are we going to blame? Nobody but us.?

To underscore her message, Ms. Nemat asked the crowd if they were familiar with several bills that already have, or are currently making their way through the House of Commons. Without expanding on her personal beliefs as to the merits of each individual bill, she said she often finds when she asks this question of large groups of people, even university law students, the hands of very few people go up.

?What I am asking you is do you know where your children are? Do you know where your politicians are? Do you know what they are up to?? she asked. ?We assume they are doing their job, but we assume wrong because politicians need us to watch them closely and, if we don't, I don't believe we can blame the politicians. If the politicians are doing badly, I am to blame and that is a fact.?



A celebration of Persian culture was the order of the day at the Aurora Cultural Centre. Auroran photo by David Falconer