

Human Rights campaign lays foundation for ongoing local dialogue



By Brock Weir

When staff at the Aurora Public Library sat down late last year to brainstorm ideas on different ways to engage the community in their One Book One Aurora campaign throughout 2014, few could have anticipated what a timely turn their planning took over the spring and summer.

The centrepiece of the program, *Prisoner of Tehran*, the bestselling memoir of Aurora's Marina Nemat, charting her harrowing life as a political prisoner and sentenced to death in Iran as a young teen, has gained added poignancy as 2014 has progressed due to the upheaval unleashed by ISIS in neighbouring Iraq and Syria.

The One Book One Aurora campaign culminates this month with a series of events built around Culture Days. On Saturday, September 27, at 2 p.m., people will have a chance to meet Ms. Nemat in person, ask questions, and take dramatic performances inspired from her memoir.

Although this event is designed to be the grand finale in a nearly year-long series, held in conjunction with a celebration of Persian culture also held that day at the Aurora Cultural Centre, plans are already underway to ensure the dialogue created during the campaign leaves an ongoing legacy.

Helping to lead the way is Aurora resident Tahirih Naylor-Thimm, a former lawyer for the United Nations.

Shortly after the birth of her youngest child, Ms. Naylor-Thimm loaded up the stroller and headed for the Aurora Public Library for a Human Rights Panel this spring. Inspired by the stories of how local people are having an impact on the world around them, Ms. Naylor-Thimm is taking a leading role in a second installment planned for next March, tentatively scheduled to coincide with International Women's Day.

Before she moved to Aurora, Ms. Naylor-Thimm was a lawyer working for the United Nations, advocating for the Baha'i International Community, an accredited NGO, to advocate for human rights all over the world and, in her case, Iran.

‘I was focused on rights as it pertains to Freedom of Religion and particularly in countries where it was denied,’ she says. ‘We actually worked very closely with Canada through the United Nations General Assembly. Within that Assembly, there is one committee that focuses specifically on human rights and for the past 15 years, Canada has sponsored a resolution on the human rights situation in Iran, bringing up violations [of the rights of] Christians, Jews, Baha'is, homosexuals, women, and any minorities having their rights violated in Iran.’

According to Ms. Naylor-Thimm, who is Baha'i herself, the Iranian government in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Resolution effectively outlawed the democratically elected councils that governed the Baha'i faith at the local and national levels. They were denied access to universities and other forms of post-secondary education and, in many cases, banned from secondary and elementary schools as well, as well as being barred from holding government jobs.

'Their cemeteries have been desecrated and even the freedom just to meet together will often be interrupted [with them being] hauled off to prison,' she explains. 'Hundreds of Baha'is have been imprisoned. In the 1980s a number of them were actually executed because of their beliefs and those were the situations we were talking about because we were familiar with them, but they are also similar situations faced by other minorities in Iran.'

When asked if she felt she and her group were truly making a difference when on the ground, Ms. Naylor-Thimm says one shouldn't discount the power of awareness. There is no world government that can 'enforce a certain set of norms' on governments and 'shaming and embarrassing' a country not living up to universal standards of human rights can be very effective tools.

'Certainly Iran fought back with everything they had,' she explains. 'It wasn't like they didn't care. They would lobby really hard and deny that they were doing these things, deny it was a problem, but the truth is there. As an educated person, you can see all the accounts coming out of the country and what was really going on, so it had the effect of the government realising the world is watching. Canada's efforts in bringing this resolution have certainly been one thing that is consistently trying to shed light on a dark situation.'

After she came home and left the UN to raise her children, she said one of the most significant things she learned is change can be made on many levels. As important as the work is there, it is equally as important to have an impact on an individual, regardless of position, station, or age.

'To me, working to build a strong community here is just as important,' she says. 'I know it sounds silly, but I do feel just as important doing that work at the United Nations because we are raising our future leaders. Our work of raising these children will influence the future, hopefully. [These panels] are very timely and I know Aurorans are far away from what is happening, but people here have big hearts and are really concerned with social justice.'

'I was really inspired at the last panel with how much people cared. They wanted to know what they could do and how they could help and I think that is always a great thing to be a part of.'

For more information on upcoming events, visit www.library.aurora.on.ca.