

Hundreds walk to highlight 'epidemic' of domestic and gender-based violence



Hundreds of residents gathered at St. Andrew's College on Sunday to raise awareness of ' and call for a stop to ' domestic and gender-based violence.

Yellow Brick House's annual Break the Silence: Step into my Shoes event took place at the campus on Sunday, November 3, drawing residents and representatives from all levels of government alike to send a poignant message that it's 'time to walk towards change.'

'I am so happy to see everyone here for our eighth-annual Walk,' said Yellow Brick House Executive Director Lorris Herenda, addressing the crowds and emcees from SAC and St. Anne's School. 'On behalf of the women and children we serve, our incredible staff, our committed volunteers and our passionate Board of Directors, welcome. Thank you to St. Andrew's and St. Anne's students and administration for once again supporting our campaign to raise awareness around Gender-based violence.'

'Last year alone, we worked with over 5,300 abused women and children and offered them a variety of our programs and services, including emergency shelter beds, our 24-7 crisis support line, our community counselling and support services, which include individual counselling for women and children, group support for women and children, family court support, transitional housing support, mental health counselling and integration coordination. We try to address all the needs that families face. Now we also reached over 2,300 students for our public education prevention program [and] today, we're not here as individuals, we are here as a powerful collective to raise awareness and break the silence about gender-based violence.'

Gender-based violence, she said, impacts 'millions of women and children in Canada' and, in underscoring the importance of shining a light on the situation, she noted these situations 'thrive in silence, behind closed doors, dismissed as a private matter,' and as though it is something to be ashamed of.

'We're here to break the silence,' she said. 'Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, gender-based violence has reached epidemic proportions in Canada with one in three women living in a violent home with their children. Today, we're going to take strides to walk to support the survivors because your courage and your resilience is incredible and they need our support.'

Taking part in Sunday's event representing Aurora were Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy, Mayor Tom Mrakas, and Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland. Also on hand to show their support were the MPs Paul Chaing and Anna Roberts, MPP Laura Smith, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Newmarket and Richmond Hill Mayor David West.

Elected representatives were invited up to the microphone to share their commitment to raising awareness and drawing a line under

the domestic violence epidemic.

'I have witnessed and heard stories of gender-based violence and we all know that victims of gender-based violence should not feel shame,' said MP Taylor Roy, noting previous participation in Take Back the Night events. 'We all have to do more. For places like Yellow Brick House that provide shelter, solace and counselling to women and children, we need to give them support.'

Addressing participants at the start of the meeting, Mayor Mrakas hailed Yellow Brick House as a 'cornerstone of support in our community' helping women and children across York Region escape violent situations and access the supports they need.

'I am grateful to see so many community members and local businesses participating in today's walk, to help ensure Yellow Brick House can continue its essential work,' he said. 'This walk is about more than just raising funds for a cause, it's about honouring the women and children lost to domestic violence, showing our support for survivors and sending a powerful message that, as a community, we are committed to ending domestic and intimate partner violence.'

'While government action is critical, each of us here today can make a difference. By coming together, we're showing we are part of the solution. We must continue working together to ensure that young people understand this issue and recognize what healthy relationships look like.'

By Brock Weir