

## One person can change the world: survivor



**By Brock Weir**

Marina Nemat grew up in Iran not entirely different from her teenage counterparts in Canada.

She enjoyed wearing a bikini on the beach, listening to the Bee Gees, and getting lost in the worlds of the dashing heroes and heroines books had to offer.

Contrary to a popular notion, it was not like growing up on 'Little House of the Prairie', she contends, but all hell broke loose during the Revolution which capped the 1970s.

The effects of the new government weren't immediate, but became drastically and terrifyingly apparent soon enough.

'I was a teen and reading Jane Austen and Ernest Hemingway and suddenly this new system came in that had promised us freedom and democracy but, of course, never delivered,' says Ms. Nemat, an Aurora resident. 'Trust me, if you had grown up in a bikini, listening to the Bee Gees and someone tells you wearing bikinis and disco dancing was illegal, you're not going to like it.'

She was not alone in not liking the imposed changes, but she quickly became a vocal minority of youth to stand up and challenge the oppression. During a crackdown in the early 1980s, this passion and candour ultimately landed her with a death sentence.

'Everything was about social injustice, everything was about politics, everything was about the new government and what was going on,' she says of writing for her school newspaper. A lot of the articles were about the new dress code where we had to wear the hijab and we absolutely hated it. [We went to] anti-government groups and rallies because it was cool to do and you got an adrenaline rush.

'All of this was very good material to write about and that is how it started. I didn't take my writing seriously at all.'

Others, however, took the writing of this 15 year old girl very seriously. They were kids. They didn't have guns. Most just stood on

the streets yelling their opposition, but gradually the Revolutionary Guards became more and more violent against those speaking out.

Her own arrest eventually followed at the age of 16 and for the next two years, she was imprisoned, sentenced to death. Behind bars, she was raped, forced to participate in mock executions, and watched friends being hauled off to the firing squads never to be seen again.

?It is so easy to sit in a warm, comfortable room and ask how you cope,? she says of her time in prison. ?Imagine for a moment if you didn't know how to swim. Somebody would just come and grab you and throw you in a very big swimming pool. Are you going to sit there and think about coping? About your life after the swimming pool? No, you're just going to keep kicking and stay afloat if you don't know how to swim. With some difficulty, you might actually make it to the edge.

?There were hundreds of thousands of us all in the same boat. 90 per cent of us were all under the age of 20, but it was rare that somebody would lose it. In the prison, we lived under horrific conditions and people were being executed. There were massacres every night and you would hear them. But, in the morning you would wake up, get into the bathroom line, wash your face, brush your teeth and it just became your day and you had to get through it. You didn't have any other option. We just wanted to go home.?

For Ms. Nemet, it was all about dealing with each moment as it came. You dealt with it because you had to. They knew at the end of the day that no one was safe, but they kept hope alive of returning home.

?If you have a death sentence, you were always a little bit more worried whenever they called your name, but then hope comes,? she says. ?When you're a teen, the out-there concept you could die is very foreign and almost surreal. At the end of the day, we just don't know what is going to happen.?

Ms. Nemat details the story of what happened next, her survival at the hands of a guard who fell in love with her and threatened to harm those she loved if she refused him, her ?forced conversion to Islam? before her marriage and his eventual fate in her bestselling memoirs ?Prisoner of Tehran? and ?After Tehran.?

She will share her story at the Aurora Public Library in a number of initiatives throughout 2014. She is at the centre of the Aurora Public Library's efforts in harnessing ?the creative energy and potential in Aurora.? A very personal initiative of Reccia Mandelcorn of the APL, they will launch the One Book Campaign to get everyone in Aurora to delve into ?Prisoner of Tehran?, creating a large-scale, community-wide ?platform for discussion and interaction?, celebrating not only the book, but ?human rights and the multidimensional experiences of our citizens.?

?For us, it is more than a literacy initiative; it is community engagement at its finest,? says Ms. Mandelcorn.

Throughout the community read, as well as writing workshops lead by Ms. Nemat in June, a Twitter Q&A, and a special seminar for Culture Days 2014 on September 27, Ms. Nemat will share her experience both on her life in prison, but how, through her forced first marriage, she came out of one prison directly into ?a bigger one.?

Ms. Nemat lives with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, an affliction of those who have survived extreme trauma, a disorder that is not, as one often assumes, limited to people who have served in the military.

?When I came out of prison, no psychologist would dare sit down and speak to me because if they did they could go to prison. You were basically left to your own devices. Your family doesn't want to talk about it because they are afraid. We have a saying in Farsi that walls have mice and mice have ears. [It] shoves the elephant under the rug pretending nothing is wrong and this is usually what survivors do. They keep going because life is out there and there are other challenges.?

Setting pen to paper in sharing her story helped deal with the symptoms of what many call the ?silent killer.?

By the time she began sharing her story on paper, Ms. Nemat was now a resident of Canada, having fled from Iran with her now

husband first to Spain, where they were supported by the church, and then to Hungary before she joined her brother and his family in Woodbridge.

From there, she and her husband bought an apartment in Richmond Hill before planting more permanent roots with their son in Aurora. They arrived in Aurora in 1993 during the Santa Claus Parade and the community atmosphere they experienced lining Yonge Street convinced them they were home.

Whether she is bringing her story to the Aurora Public Library or through the vaunted halls of libraries throughout Europe and around the world, she is grateful for the opportunity to strike a chord in the lives of audiences. When people come to hear her speak, they often have "easier, more pleasant things to do", she says, but in that time, she aims to have an impact "sometimes an advantage over the written word which can create a distance between the author and the reader, she adds.

"When I actually go up in front of an audience and tell my story in a personal way, people realise how similar our lives are before all hell breaks loose," she says. "There is a moment where you can read it in the eyes of the audience where they begin to connect.

"[In the world of Facebook and Twitter] there is something about a personal presence. I can say, "I was there. This happened to me and it hurt. And it's still hurting. I am a witness. I am here because it is my job, but it is more than my job. It is who I am to tell you what happened because it is still happening. It is not a thing of the past, and I believe there are things we can do to make the world a better place. I strongly believe that one person can definitely change the world."