

Realtor plans Sahara Desert trek to support local women's shelters



By Brock Weir

On Saturday, women of all ages gathered at the Aurora Seniors' Centre to learn a few tips on self defence.

Self defence is a potent skill in anyone's arsenal, but this session, facilitated by Aurora realtor Caroline Baile and instructor Anuj Batra, had a broader purpose: helping to make a lasting positive impact on local women's shelters.

The self defence course was a fundraiser towards Ms. Baile's upcoming trek through the Sahara Desert to support the Royal LePage Shelter Foundation.

Over 100 Royal LePage professionals will head to Morocco this November to trek more than 100km over five days, crossing difficult terrain in desert temperatures that dip to almost freezing at night.

It won't be easy. They will have to sleep in group tents, forego the luxuries of indoor plumbing, electricity, cell phone service and the comforts of home.

It is a small sacrifice to make for the greater good, says Ms. Baile.

The Sahara Desert Challenge for Shelter is a fundraising event for the Royal LePage Shelter Foundation, which encourages agents from across the country to raise funds and train for a gruelling ? physically, mentally and emotionally ? experience.

'The question was, 'How can we bring attention to the plight of women and children fleeing with just the clothes on their backs?' said Ms. Baile about the urgent needs of local shelters, including Yellow Brick House.

This is a cause close to the heart for Ms. Baile, and one she is very passionate about.

'As realtors, helping people find their dream home is our job,' she says. 'A home is supposed to be a place of comfort, safety and love. Sadly, this is not the case for everyone in our community. Domestic Violence affects women and children across the country, regardless of geographics or demographics. Young, old, wealthy or oppressed; sadly, domestic violence is seen across the spectrum.

'Unlike illness which we have no control over, domestic violence is a cause we can bring an end to. Together we can make a difference! Every step we take and every dollar raised goes directly towards adding additional shelter beds so women and children are not turned away in their darkest hour.'

With a fundraising goal of \$7,000 with six months left to go, not to mention the additional out-of-pocket expenses like flights and gear, Ms. Baile is in the zone.

That is not to say, however, there is not a small degree of trepidation before she heads out to Morocco with her colleagues.

'One of the challenges is the physical endurance,' she says. 'It wouldn't be difficult walking eight or ten hours a day in regular temperatures, but when you're doing it in desert temperatures with the scorching sun during the day and dipping down to freezing at night, and trekking in sand where you're not making the distance or having to traverse big mountains, it is a little more challenging. The greatest challenge for me will not be physical, but the emotional and mental aspects of this trek. Long hours thinking about every step I take and why I am doing this: to raise funds for those fleeing domestic abuse in our community.

'I am looking forward to being completely exposed to the elements and the raw emotion it will take. There is preparation for the physical challenges of this trek, but it will be the emotional component of knowing why we are out there that will drive me forward every day. To be out there in the middle of nowhere with our thoughts, knowing we are making a difference in the lives of those in our community is my 'why.'

Sadly, on any given night

in Canada, nearly 6,000 women and children are forced to stay in emergency shelter beds because it is not safe for them to stay at home. At the same time, hundreds are turned away each night as the shelters are full. On average, every six days in Canada, a woman is killed by her current or former partner.

Half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16. 67 per cent of Canadians personally know a woman who has been abused. 362,000 Canadian children are exposed to domestic violence each year.

For more information on how to support Caroline Baile on her November trek through the Sahara, visit www.carolinebaile.com/fundraising/