

MHR *Connections*

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Winnipeg Activist Receives Award For Advancing Human Rights

Justice Minister Gord Mackintosh presents Jim Derksen with the 2002 Manitoba Human Rights Commitment Award.

Jim Derksen's dedication and energy in working to ensure equality of opportunity for persons with disabilities spans more than three decades. His volunteer and professional commitments have included advocacy work regarding the protection of persons with disabilities within the Human Rights Code and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Mr. Derksen received the 2002 Manitoba Human Rights Commitment Award for his ongoing work in advancing human rights issues.

Mr. Derksen is a native of Manitoba. He was born in Morris and became disabled during the polio epidemic of 1953. He has used a wheelchair for personal mobility ever since. He has participated in the founding, and served as National Chairperson of the Council for Canadians with Disabilities and the Canadian Disability Rights Council. Mr. Derksen lives in Winnipeg where he works as a policy analyst for the Manitoba Government.

In accepting his award, Mr. Derksen said, "Ideally, we could make the world so that everyone could participate fully in spite of his or her disabilities." He added, "we still have a long way to go to see that the rights of people are honoured."

The Manitoba Human Rights Commission, the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Community Legal Education Association jointly sponsored the luncheon on December 10th in celebration of International Human Rights Day.

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The Rights Connection by Janet Baldwin - Chairperson Peace and Acceptance

Increasingly, those who mark Christmas recognize that it is not universally celebrated. There have been many stories recently about public or corporate efforts to be more inclusive at this time of year. For example, it seems that store policy left some Gap retail employees uncertain as to whether they could wish a "Merry Christmas" to customers who told them they were Christmas shopping. This awkwardness may ease when we shift our understanding of our community and accept that it is in fact diverse, rather than diversity being something that a dominant culture accommodates.

This time of year brings to mind the case of Jones against C.H.E. Pharmacy - the "poinsettia case". In accordance with his faith, Mr. Jones, a Jehovah's Witness, did not celebrate Christmas. For 15 years of his employment as a merchandiser at a Shoppers Drug Mart, store Christmas preparations did not conflict with his religious beliefs. Then ownership of the pharmacy changed and everyone was required to help decorate the store for Christmas. Mr. Jones was asked to hang a garland, and feeling distressed but under pressure, did so. A few days later, however, he refused to set out poinsettias, saying it was against his religion. Told that he would be dismissed if he didn't set them out, Mr. Jones left.

The BC tribunal that heard Mr. Jones' case ordered the respondents to pay Mr. Jones \$25,953.56 for lost wages and benefits, \$1,142 for expenses incurred, and \$3,500 damages for injury to dignity and self-respect. Media coverage of this January 2001 decision tended to see these awards as a huge payment for not putting out a few potted plants. The reality that someone who had served an employer for more than 15 years was fired for refusing to violate their religious beliefs - beliefs that could have so easily been accommodated, at that - was trivialized.

Students Take Part in Harassment and Discrimination Workshops

The Manitoba Human Rights Commission hosted its second annual Youth Awareness Conference in Winnipeg. Once again students from around the province attended the conference on December 6, 2002 at the Franco-Manitobain Culturel Centre.

This year, vice Chairperson Jerry Woods opened the conference by acknowledging that December 6 was the sad anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, and the death of 14 female students. Mr. Woods asked the students to take a moment and reflect on the "National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women" and invited student Karen Bees from Silver Heights Collegiate to light a candle in memory of the women.



Students give a "thumbs up" to the 2002 Youth Awareness Conference.

Mr. Woods had a message for the students about their human rights. "These are your rights, not just the rights of adults. No one can take them away. Equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination are your human rights and they are non-negotiable."

Four topical workshops were offered to the students. The Working Blues workshop, which was offered last year, dealt with human rights in the workplace. This year, however, the students were asked to do a little acting to better understand their rights. As one student put it, "in the Working Blues workshop, the role playing idea was excellent."

Kevin Chief also returned for a second year as a guest in the Sticks and Stones Workshop. Kevin played for five years on the University of Winnipeg's basketball team, the last two as captain. Along with two human rights workers, he spoke about accepting differences, not pre-judging people and the importance of taking part in extra curricular activities.

One of the most popular workshops this year was Pride and Prejudice. There were two special guests, Donna Huen of the Rainbow Resource Centre and Josh Malam, a recent high school graduate, who talked about what it was like to be gay in high school. His open and honest approach resulted in many students asking questions and taking part in group discussions.

The final workshop was the conference favourite. Not So Trivial Pursuit was a take-off on the famous game, but all the questions had to do with human rights. The floor was the board and students worked their way to the centre by answering the questions correctly. This workshop will form the basis for a new online quiz that will be available on the MHRC website in the new year.

At lunch the students were in for a spectacular combination of music and dance. The group "Burnt" took to the stage performing their unique combination of blues, jazz, folk, contemporary, tribal and Indigenous music. Two First Nations dancers joined the group in a modern, energetic form of traditional dance.



While students listened to "Burnt", dancers added colour and movement to the music.

The Conference concluded with a showing of the finalists in the video contest. The winning video had a star wars cloning theme. Its message is that differences are better than everyone being the same. This winning video was made by the students of Garden Valley Collegiate and was called "Discrimination."

The winning school received a \$500 certificate to Advance Electronics. The schools receiving honourable mentions received a \$200 gift certificate.

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International Human Rights Day marks the anniversary of the United Nations adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The Universal Declaration is the basis of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Madam Justice Colleen Sude was the keynote speaker at the international Human Rights Day Celebration. Madam Justice Sude has been a human rights adjudicator and her practice had been primarily in arbitration, mediation and human rights law.

In her address, she spoke proudly of the Manitoba Human Rights Code, which came into existence in 1987, replacing the Manitoba Human Rights Act. She said it is only now that the rest of the country has caught up with Manitoba and cited many instances where Manitoba lead the way in human rights.

Madam Justice Sude reminded everyone that we came from diversity and now we need to rely on our diversity to survive. She concluded saying, "we must eliminate 'they' and make everyone 'us.'"

Over 120 people attended the International Human Rights Day lunch and Commitment Award presentation.

The Manitoba Human Rights Commission gratefully acknowledges the many sponsors who generously donated to the 2002 Manitoba Youth Awareness Conference.

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