

MHR Connections

Published by the Manitoba Human Rights Commission

Volume 3 Number 11

November 2003

Conference “Rocks”

“The Manitoba Human Rights Conference Rocks” according to student Ted Gebrehiwot. “It’s great and I think students need to hear this.”

With that ringing endorsement, The Manitoba Human Rights Commission concluded its third annual youth conference. One hundred and twenty students arrived at the Franco Manitobain Culturel Centre on November 21 to learn about their rights under *The Manitoba Human Rights Code*.

This year the Commission offered students a choice of four workshops. The Not so Trivial Pursuit workshop once again came out a winner as students tested their knowledge of human rights.

Although it may be hard to beat a workshop that has so much fun built into learning, the students had some interesting things to say about the other three as well. For example, after the Diversity without Division Workshop, one Vincent Massey student said that he believed that people



Students discuss human rights issues at the 2003 Youth Conference

discriminate because they don’t understand. “It’s about stereotyping. I learned a lot and I am glad I came.” Another student added, “ I didn’t know that people who are gay or Muslim went through so much.”

Special guests at the Diversity and Division workshop included Josh Malam, a recent high school graduate who is gay, and Mahwewash Bashir Rajput, a young Muslim woman.

Upstairs two more workshops were also receiving rave reviews. Mia Momma, which was offered for the first time this year, dealt with the rights and responsibilities of pregnant teens and teen moms. This workshop featured teens from the local group Resources for Adolescent Parents (RAP). Through a series of skits, monologues and a question and answer period, these young women shared their teen pregnancy experiences.

Martine Tambwe of Louis Riel School said, “I never thought that young pregnant girls could be judged that way.”

This workshop hit home with many students. They

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The Rights Connection By Janet Baldwin - Chairperson Social and Economic Rights

In previous columns, I have said that we have asked the Government to amend *The Human Rights Code* to add “social condition” as a protected ground (defining it as “circumstances relating to social or economic disadvantage”). Our existing *Code* protections from discrimination do not adequately address discriminatory treatment based on an intersection of personal characteristics related to a person’s position in society. Unequal treatment and poverty are often linked, as many single mothers, and persons who are elderly, disabled, Aboriginal, members of racial minorities and/or transgendered know only too well. Adding the ground of “social condition” would also focus attention on poverty and homelessness in our society.

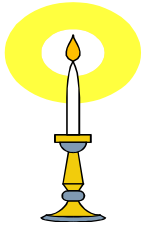
Our Government might be concerned as to whether such a change would expose its own programs to human rights challenges. The Government is already open to complaints based on any of the protected grounds, including “source of income”, and a prohibition from discrimination based on social condition would be subject to the same “without reasonable cause” proviso as are all other protections under *The Code*. The deference to the overall authority of legislators with respect to social policy and fiscal priorities also applies.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Committee of the United Nations has recommended that social and economic rights be expressly incorporated into our human rights legislation. Worldwide, there has been a gradual shift towards improved protection for social and economic rights. Human rights protections have, however, traditionally emphasized “negative” rights – protections from discriminatory treatment. The door to “positive” rights – rights which might require the government to act in a way that yields greater equality or furthers human dignity (for example, providing affordable housing) – is slowly opening.

Tribunals and courts can offer guidance to legislators about social and economic rights, and this serves as an important check in our society. While court and tribunal decisions with respect to social and economic rights may at times impose obligations on governments, this is a positive development in a social democracy that values rights.

2003 Human Rights Commitment Awards Presented on International Human Rights Day

The nominations are in for this year's Manitoba Human Rights Commitment Award and the recipients will be presented with their award on December 10th, International Human Rights Day. The presentation will take place at a luncheon to be held at the Sheraton Hotel in Winnipeg. This year's event also includes the inaugural Manitoba Human Rights Youth Award.



The 2003 Commitment Award will recognize work in the field of social and economic rights as found in the United Nations' International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The keynote speaker at the luncheon will be Gail Asper, President of the CanWest Global Foundation.

Former recipients of the Manitoba Human Rights Award include the late Hersch Zentner (Winner 2001) a teacher and human rights activist, Jim Derksen (2002) the founder of the Council for Canadians with Disabilities and Phil Fontaine (co-winner 1990) the Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

The Manitoba Human Rights Commitment Award is sponsored by The Canadian Human Rights Commission, The Manitoba Human Rights Commission, The Community Legal Education Association and Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties.

For more information regarding the Commitment Award Luncheon or to purchase tickets to the event, please call Patricia Knipe at 945-5112.

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were particularly concerned with a student's right to continue school during and after pregnancy, and to be accommodated when it came to homework and doctor's appointments.

Perhaps the workshop that sparked the best debate and interaction was Taking Care of Business, about rights in the workplace. For the most part the discussion focussed on dress codes and the students debated among themselves as to what was fair. Students were also concerned about reprisals from employers if they filed a complaint. As one student put it, "I loved the interaction in this workshop."

The Conference opened with remarks from Jerry Woods, the Vice-Chairperson of the Manitoba Human Rights Board of Commissioners. He addressed the students by first giving an overview of *The Code*, and later explaining that "human rights are not just the rights of adults. They are your rights too." He encouraged everyone to talk, ask questions and listen.

Over lunch the students were entertained by Steeple Chaser, a Winnipeg rock band. As expected they were a hit. Comments ranged from "Steeple Chaser was a good choice of entertainment" to "Steeple Chaser was awesome." The band graciously stayed after their performance to talk with the students and sign autographs.

The Conference concluded with the viewing of the video that won first place in the Human Rights Video Contest. The winning school was West Kildonan Collegiate. Jerry Woods described the video as "both clever and powerful." The video is called "Poverty and Justice in Winnipeg" and it can be viewed on the Commission's website along with other conference highlights including what students said about stamping out discrimination in their schools. The website can be found at www.gov.mb.ca/hrc.

Thank you to the sponsors of the 2003 Manitoba Human Rights Youth Conference

- .. The Manitoba Metis Federation
- .. The Association of Employees Supporting Education Services
- .. Commissioner Elliot Leven
- .. Locals 341, 681 and 7 of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada.
- .. Ideal Electric Manufacturing
- .. The Asper Foundation
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- .. CEP Union of Canada Manitoba Area Council
- .. Peace Hills Trust



Board of Commissioner's Vice-Chair Person Jerry Woods telling students that equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination is non-negotiable.

According to the United Nations International **Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, social and economic rights include: the right to work, just and favorable conditions of work; the rights to form trade unions and to join a trade union; the right of social security; the right to maternity leave and benefits; the protection of children from economic and social exploitation; the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing; the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; and the right to an education.