

Asper says people should be respected not 'tolerated'

Honoured Asper Foundation recognized for its work with New Brunswick high school students

By KRIS MCDAVID
mcdavid.kristofer@dailygleaner.com

If Gail Asper had it her way, the word 'tolerant' would be eliminated from the English language.

The daughter of the late CanWest Global Communications founder and philanthropist Izzy Asper was in Fredericton on Saturday to accept an award from the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission on behalf of her family's namesake foundation.

The Human Rights Commission presented its rare Pioneer of Human Rights Award to the Asper Foundation for its work in sensitizing New Brunswick high school students to the consequences of racism through its Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program.

Asper, managing director of the foundation, accepted the award during a youth forum on human rights held at St. Thomas University.

"We've eliminated the word tolerance from anything that has to do with our program," said Asper.

"We shouldn't ever be tolerating people; we should always be respecting and enjoying people."

Since 1997, the Asper Foundation has accepted more than 7,000 Grade 9 students from across Canada, including more than 115 students from New Brunswick.

During that span, the foundation has provided more than \$100,000 to enable students from all faiths and backgrounds to participate.

"The program focuses squarely on the importance of not being indifferent. My dad, who was also a lawyer, always liked to close the program with the students signing a memorandum of responsibility, which he viewed as a contract," said Asper.

"The hope is that by signing a declaration, you won't be indifferent, and that you will uphold one of the most important lessons of the Holocaust, that is, of personal responsibility for the world community."

UNB student Madeleine Whalen

participated in the program when she was a student at Ecole Sainte-Anne.

She said it helped to shed a powerful light on one of the darkest chapters in human history.

"It was certainly an eye-opener, just through the educational aspects of the program and flying us all to Washington, D.C., to visit the Holocaust Museum," said Whalen.

"I had obviously heard of the Holocaust before, but actually being at the museum, seeing the pictures and exhibits, it had a bigger impact on me than I thought it would."

The ceremony marked the first time the Pioneer of Human Rights award has been presented since 2002, when former premier Louis J. Robichaud, Senate speaker Noel Kinsella, and former chief commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission Gordon Fairweather all received

the honour.

Gordon Porter, chairman of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission, said the Asper Foundation has blazed a trail in promoting human rights issues to the younger generation.

"Human rights awareness starts with youth, and this program gets them engaged in a forceful way," he said.

"The Asper family has set a great example for us to follow, and we challenge others to step forward and join their pioneer efforts to advance human rights among youth. We are pleased that students from New Brunswick have been able to be part of it."

The Asper Foundation is helping to spearhead the construction of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, to be located in Asper's hometown of Winnipeg.

Targeting completion in 2010, the museum would be the first national museum located outside of Ottawa.

For more information on the Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, visit humanrights.asperfoundation.com



THE DAILY GLEANER/JAMES WEST PHOTO

LEADING THE WAY: Gail Asper holds up her framed Pioneer of Human Rights Award while standing with Ed Doherty, minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour and minister responsible for the Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat; beside Doherty on the right is Audrey Lampert of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission. In back are students from Woodstock High School, Hartland High School and Ecole Sainte-Anne on Saturday afternoon at St. Thomas University.

Those born free need to help others who are not

By KRIS MCDAVID
mcdavid.kristofer@dailygleaner.com

High school students from across the province descended on St. Thomas University over the weekend for a crash course in human rights and to celebrate the 60th anniversary of an invaluable document and the New Brunswicker who helped pen it.

The youth forum, hosted jointly by the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission and the Atlantic Human Rights Centre, exposed students in grades 11 and 12 to issues in human rights through a series of workshops and presentations.

Entitled Born Free, the conference coincided with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; originally drafted by Hampton native John Peters Humphrey in 1948.

Dr. Michael McGowan, director of

STU's human rights program, as well as the Atlantic Human Rights Centre, said the forum served as a perfect venue for generating human rights awareness among youth.

"I would suggest that the students here this weekend are the top leaders in our high school system, and these are the leaders of tomorrow," he said.

"We've invited students from across the province to spend a day with us, just dealing with some human rights theory but also teaching them how to put that theory into practice."

McGowan said students learned about a litany of global and local human rights issues, pertaining to areas such as poverty, multiculturalism, international development, and the use of children as soldiers.

"It's important to bring the students here to be able to give them some space to discuss among their own peers, what

are the issues facing their own generation," he said.

"Hopefully the lessons that they learned here today will start to show up in our communities, to improve the way we live and the way we do things."

Audrey Lampert, a commissioner with the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission, told students that it should be everyone's responsibility to commit to the pursuit of achieving true freedom for people around the world.

"Hopefully, as you transition into adulthood, you will do all in your power to support the global fight for human rights," she said.

"Your experience here this weekend will hopefully have opened up your minds and hearts to do just that, and we who are born free do have a responsibility for those in our world community who do not enjoy freedom."