

COURAGE TO CARE
OFFICIAL OPENING HORSHAM
MONDAY 20TH. JULY 2009

All here will have heard of Transylvania, the region in Europe, now part of Romania. Most of you will associate this place with the fictional Count Dracula, the infamous vampire of Bram Stoker's novel and the star of more than 200 films, in the horror genre, made about him and his imagined exploits.

However, another person who undoubtedly deserves the widest acknowledgement also came from the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania. He came to the world's attention also as a result of horror. Not fictionalised or fantasised horror, but the real horror of the ultimate example of man's inhumanity to his fellow man.

This man is the renowned author and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel. In being granted this award he was described as a "messenger to mankind".

In April 1999 he gave an address at the White House entitled "The Peril of Indifference" and I would like to quote from that address:

"What will the legacy of this vanishing century be? How will it be remembered in the new millennium? Surely it will be judged, and judged severely, in both moral and metaphysical terms. These failures have cast a dark shadow over humanity; two World Wars, countless civil wars, the senseless chain of assassinations (Gandhi, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Sadat, Rabin), bloodbaths in Cambodia and Nigeria, India and Pakistan, Ireland and Rwanda, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sarajevo and Kosovo; the inhumanity in the gulag and the tragedy of Hiroshima, And, on a different level, of course, Auschwitz and Treblinka. So much violence; so much indifference."

"What is indifference?..... A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil. What are its courses and inescapable consequences? Is it a philosophy? Is there a philosophy of indifference conceivable? Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? Is it necessary at times to practise it simply to keep one's sanity, live

normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals?”

So many questions; so many reasonable questions and yet do we have the answers?

This Courage to Care Exhibition and Educational Program seeks to challenge indifference. We will be reminding our audience, the 1500 senior secondary school students who will visit here over the next 2 weeks, of the events that took place in Europe that led to the victimisation of Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious groups, the Nazi’s political opponents and critics, homosexuals, the killing of some 200 – 250,000 mentally or physically disabled, the murder of some 250,000 Roma or Gypsies and the Final Solution to the so-called Jewish Problem – the extermination of 6 million Jews. All of this against a background of indifference to the fate of so many.

But this reminder is not our goal; rather it is the backdrop to the extraordinary actions of those known as the Righteous who chose not to be indifferent to what was happening to their fellow man and, at risk to their very lives and the lives of their families, took action. In the face of mortal danger they thumbed their noses at indifference.

And yet, humanity has not learnt the dangers of such indifference and so the numerous human tragedies that Eli Wiesel refers to have continued to the present day.

But indifference to the fate of others so often exists in our own backyard as well and this is the importance and relevance of this Program to the young people of Horsham and its region. They will have seen the indifference of others in their school yards when the bully attacks his or her victims; some of them will have been such victims, some of them will be the actual bully or their supporters. But the majority will be the indifferent ones, the bystanders who for a variety of reasons choose not to intervene.

As a result of their visit here, with the help of 9 Holocaust survivors and almost 3 dozen volunteer Guides & Facilitators, we hope that we are able to cause students to develop a degree of empathy towards victims – whether they be victims of prejudice, discrimination, racism, intolerance or plain old-fashioned bullying. We would like to plant a seed in their consciousness about the role of the bystander, the indifferent ones, in such confrontations. We wish to challenge them to think about their own

reactions to such situations and to increase their awareness that each of them have the potential to make a difference to the lives of another.

I can put it no better than Eli Wiesel again:

“Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor – never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees – and as an aside I would add, the victim of bullying – not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.”

“Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment.”

The fictional Count Dracula is thought by some to be based on the 15th. Century Transylvanian born Vlad III Dracula of Wallachia, fondly given the title of Vlad the Impaler, who was said to have been responsible for the deaths of 20 – 40,000 people by impaling them on a sharp pole!

Eli Wiesel, on the other hand, has been responsible rather for pricking the conscience of humanity to the sin of indifference and engendering hope of replacing this with a sense of respect and responsibility for our fellow man.

Courage to Care also endeavours to do this.