

Helpline tour reminds kids help is available

By CINDY CHAN
Epoch Times Staff

Canada's toll-free, anonymous, confidential helpline for kids completed its annual cross-country school tour last week reminding students that they have someone to call no matter what challenges they face.

Beginning last November, three teams of counsellors from Kids Help Phone presented at 30 high schools across the country.

It was an "awesome" opportunity to meet the students and raise awareness about Kids Help Phone, said Cheryl-Lynn Roberts, a counsellor who has worked at the Toronto-based non-profit organization for nearly nine years.

"They did a lot of outreach and reached over 10,000 students," she said.

This year is Kids Help Phone's third annual school tour presented by Motorola's Raise Your Voice program.

Raise Your Voice supports youth by partnering with organizations that provide resources and information and encourage young people to ask for help when they need it and to speak out on issues that affect them.

The six counsellors divided themselves into a Quebec team that also visited French schools in northern Ontario and two English teams that travelled to other parts of Canada.

Ms. Roberts said that last year Kids Help Phone assisted kids and youth from nearly 3,000 communities and more than 2.2 million times on the phone and online.

The organization's approximately 100 full- and part-time professional

counsellors provide phone and web counselling, referral, and information for young people—mostly from five to 20 years of age—round the clock every day of the year.

This year, Kids Help Phone celebrates 20 years in existence. Its phones first went live in 1989, the website launched in 1996, and online counselling began in 2002.

"Our calls have increased over the years. We are getting more calls about bullying, cyber-bullying, and Internet safety," Ms. Roberts said.

"Over 70 percent of the calls are from well-functioning, high-functioning kids. About 30 percent are the ones that are more serious."

In one case, a teenage boy from Ontario called and said he had taken some pills but didn't want to die. He was very groggy and didn't know exactly where he was but was able to provide some nearby landmarks, such as a coffee shop and a gas station. Ms. Roberts provided this information to the ambulance to get help to the boy.

Unless the caller wishes to reveal their identity, "it's really anonymous and we don't want any child to ever feel pressured," she said.

The counsellors do not call out or call kids back and cannot trace calls, as they do not have call display on their phones.

Last week a young girl called wanting to report abuse going on at her home by both parents, including being beaten with a belt by her father.

In this case "I was more or less an advocate for the child because the child was ready to disclose," Ms. Roberts said.

She called the Children's Aid Society and arranged a three-way call. The social worker took down the girl's name and phone number and arranged to meet her at her school.

"At the end of that shift I was happy I stayed over later just to stay on the phone with her. I left feeling that this is why I come here, because it does make a difference."

Last year 23 percent of the requests for help were related to mental health concerns, about 22 percent were peer issues, 13 percent were family issues, and 10 percent were related to sexuality. Other topics included abuse, bullying, physical health, addictions, suicide, acculturation, and school.

Ms. Roberts also spoke of the challenges facing the kids.

"Parenting is probably the toughest and most important job that you'll ever do in your life, no matter what your career is, but there are times where the children are calling us and we're asking these kids to try and resolve things. Sometimes their hands are tied; it's hard for them."

Kids Help Phone maintains a national database of nearly 37,000 child and youth services to enable counsellors to refer kids to resources in their own communities. It is a member of Child Helpline International, a network of over 80 child helplines working to protect children's rights worldwide.

The annual Walk for Kids Help Phone takes place on May 3. Last year walkers in 55 communities across Canada raised \$3 million.

Kids Help Phone can be reached at 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca.



Kids Help Phone counsellors Duane and Sara spoke to students at Leaside High School in Toronto on February 24, 2009. This year's Kids Help Phone School Tour presented by Motorola's Raise Your Voice program visited 30 schools across Canada. VIRGINIA MIDDLETON

Budget passes, opposition moves to reroute spending

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"This is the way to get the most money out in the quickest period of time to the greatest effect."

"The whole idea is to get money out the door and into line at the right places"

The NDP criticized the Liberals for not introducing the idea as an amendment to the budget, but Kennedy said in a previous interview that such a move would have been inconsistent with the Liberals' efforts to get the budget passed quickly.

"The whole idea is to get money out the door and into line at the right places," he said, adding that it was better to get the budget passed and then get it fixed than to hold it up and potentially topple the government.

However, in another budget twist on Wednesday, the Liberals and Conservatives hit an impasse over a \$3 billion fund meant to rapidly inject money into the economy.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff has said the Liberals won't release the funds without prior itemization. The Conservatives have said they won't provide that information as it will slow down dispersal.

It now remains to be seen whether the government and the opposition can work out their differences to get stimulus monies into the economy.



Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff GETTY IMAGES

Jewish students brace for Israeli Apartheid Week

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"We welcome all types of opinions to our event and we ensure that there's at least a 20-minute discussion period at the end where we like to hear from everyone across the spectrum as long as there isn't any racist or discriminatory content to what they're saying."

A student at U of T, Shahidi calls Hillel at Toronto a "Zionist organization whose mandate is primarily to protect the state of Israel rather than be supportive of all the different types of opinions that exist in the Jewish community."

She says accusations that SAIA favours intimidation over debate are "absolutely preposterous."

"We've actually been asking for more dialogue in the form of an open and public debate for two years and we haven't heard any positive response from any Zionist groups to

take that on."

During last year's IAW, University of Toronto president David Naylor was quoted in the National Post as saying that the event "is the consistently worst week of a president's life." He was referring to the numerous complaints he receives about the event. However, IAW is allowed to take place under the banner of free speech.

In response to objections from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, U of T published a statement signed by Naylor declaring, "We do, in fact, recognize that the term Israeli Apartheid is upsetting to many people, [but] we also recognize that, in every society, universities have a unique role to provide a safe venue for highly charged discourse."

Alastair Gordon, VP communications for the Canadian Coalition for Democracies, questions the validity

of branding Israel as apartheid, as the country is a pluralistic democracy that embraces gender and religious equality regardless of peoples' ethnic origins.

"Palestinians are treated like dogs in Saudi Arabia but I don't see these protests against Saudi Arabia," he says, adding that he commends the many universities that have recognized IAW as "an act of hatred" and refused to host it.

"It's being done under the guise of intellectual freedom but it just smells like the same old Jew hatred that poisoned much of the 20th century and is now poisoning the 21st century."

According to the U.S.-based Anti-Defamation League, a "pandemic of anti-Semitism" erupted around the world in the wake of Israel's three-week military action in response to Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza.

Amid widespread belief that Is-

rael had used excessive force, the offensive triggered incidents ranging from the shooting of two Israelis by a man of Arab descent in Denmark to attacks on Jews, synagogues, and Jewish businesses and homes in numerous countries.

The Canadian Federation of Jewish Students (CFJS) says there has also been "alarming growth" on campuses across Canada of bullying and intimidation of students who show support for Israel.

CFJS held a press conference last Thursday in Toronto to call attention to what they call "a toxic and frightening atmosphere in which Jewish students fear for their safety."

"Tensions have increased since the operations in Gaza," says Ferman. "It's rough on the student community as a whole. When one student is made to feel threatened all students are threatened, because it no longer

presents a safe environment."

Jewish student groups are holding various events during the week to counteract negative images of Israel and to help Jewish students feel supported.

Gordon, who says universities have become "hotbeds of hatred," believes anti-Israel activists should not be allowed to hold their activities on property that is funded by tax dollars.

However, he adds, the Jewish community itself holds the key to stopping it.

"When it comes to universities that align themselves to be used for this kind of hatred, the only thing that speaks is money. And since the Jewish community is the most philanthropic, the most generous in Canada, especially to universities, hospitals, and others, I think the withdrawal of their funding could very quickly put an end to this."

MPs, activists call for release of human rights lawyer

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Mr. Gao, a Christian, is known for his efforts to defend democracy activists, underground Christians and Falun Gong practitioners. Many believe that it was his defense of the latter that brought the full fury of China's communist regime upon him.

Neve said it is "beyond question" that Mr. Gao has been detained by Chinese security forces and that he is being held in a secret undisclosed location.

"There is every reason in the world to fear that in such circumstances that he is once again at very grave risk of torture. The Canadian government must forcefully take up his case with Chinese authorities and encourage other governments to follow our lead."

Liberal MP and noted human rights lawyer Irwin Cotler is among those calling for Mr. Gao's release.

Unable to attend the press conference due to urgent personal matters, Cotler sent a statement proclaiming Mr. Gao as "a great—and courageous—hero of China, the rule of law, and the human rights community."

"We will not relent until this courageous human rights defender—a Nobel Peace Prize nominee—will be released and his safety secured," he wrote.

"We serve notice today on the Chinese government that the ends of justice will be pursued until this great hero of China is freed."

In an interview later that day, Mr. Cotler said he hoped Mr. Gao's case was taken up by Canadians and the international community.

"For a person of what I would call singular courage and bravery, whom the Chinese government should have honoured as a hero of China, the result regrettably of his human rights advocacies is he has been abducted and beaten and tortured. And of course, now, we know the full horror of that torture in the letter recently released by his family."

That letter can be read at China-Aid.org.

When the Liberals' Foreign Affairs critic, Bob Rae, was asked if he supported Mr. Cotler in his call for Mr. Gao's release he said, "We're very proud in the Liberal Party that we have someone like Irwin who is fighting for human rights and of course I support his call."

David Kilgour, former MP and Minister of State for Asia Pacific, spoke at the press conference of Mr. Gao's past and present.

"It is not widely known that Gao Zhisheng was born in rural China in a cave. And his family was so poor that they couldn't even afford \$10 for a casket for his father when he died. He has had an extraordinary life."

Mr. Kilgour went on to describe how Mr. Gao had risen to become one of China's top lawyers, and that he donated his time to many who needed help. He described him as "an extraordinary human being."

Mr. Gao, who had been recog-



Lawyer Gao Zhisheng. VERNIA YU/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

nized by China's Ministry of Justice as one of the country's 10 best lawyers, has said that he and his family's ordeal started after his conscience led him to start investigating the persecution of Falun Gong in 2004. He subsequently wrote three open letters to top Chinese officials urging them to stop the persecution of those who practiced the spiritual discipline.

In 2005, Mr. Gao quit the Chinese Communist Party, saying: "This [Chinese Communist] Party has employed the most savage, most

immoral, and most illegal means to torture our mothers, torture our wives, torture our children, and torture our brothers and sisters... Today, I, Gao Zhisheng... formally withdraw from this inhumane, unjust, and evil Party. This is the proudest day of my life."

Also at the press conference was Wayne Marston, MP for Hamilton East-Stoney Creek, and the NDP's representative on the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

Mr. Marston said it was crucial that Canada sustain and maintain

its reputation as a defender of human rights both at home and abroad.

"It is important for our government, through our Foreign Affairs minister, to contact the Chinese government and ensure that they understand our concerns and our country's concerns and our peoples' concerns and that we work hard to bring this individual back."

In an interview later that day, Stockwell Day, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade deferred questions on Mr. Gao's cases to Immigration Minister Jason Kenney but said "We obviously are very concerned about the issue." Mr. Day is scheduled to make a trade trip to China in April.

Mr. Kenney's office did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

At the press conference, Grace Wollensak of the Falun Dafa Association of Canada praised Gao for his human rights advocacy in China and called on Chinese authorities to immediately release him.

"His horrific treatment should be a wake-up call to the international community about the Chinese regime's total disregard for human rights and the rule of law," she said.

Wollensak said the torture and abuse that Mr. Gao has faced resembles the treatment of over 3200 Falun Gong adherents who have been confirmed killed by the regime since 1999.

"That really highlights the life-threatening danger that is facing Gao."