

Community Matters

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You Can Protect Human Rights

By: Patricia A. O'Malley

Next Wednesday is International Human Rights Day. It marks the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted on December 10, 1948. The declaration recognizes that all people – including you – possess certain absolute human rights and that we all must protect those rights. Every nation in the world has since accepted its principles of justice and equality for each of us.

In the aftermath of World War II, the UN delegates knew that immense cruelty and suffering result from human rights violations and that freedom, justice, and world peace can only come from recognizing the dignity and rights of everyone. All UN agencies work to promote these rights through their programs.

Our rights include:

- equality under the law, without discrimination of any kind;
- freedom from slavery, torture, and invasion of privacy;
- freedom of movement and residence, of assembly and association, of thought, opinion, conscience, and religion.

We have the rights to:

- participate in government and in the cultural life of the community;
- marry the partner of our choice and establish a family, own property, obtain public services, receive an education, and enjoy rest and leisure;
- free choice of employment with good working conditions, equal pay for equal work, an adequate standard of living, and to join labor unions.

You have the right to a fair, speedy, and public trial in an impartial court when you are accused of a crime.

The US Constitution and subsequent law contain all of these rights. Americans still enjoy most of them, but many world citizens don't. In 1993, the UN established the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to handle the world response to atrocities such as those in the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, etc.) and in Rwanda.

In 2006, an OHCHR report noted the hypocrisy of American human rights policy. The US adopted the declaration and claims to support human rights. Our government claims that it does not torture prisoners. However, the American government captured people, labeled them as terrorists, and moved them from their home countries to prison in Cuba. For more than seven years, our government has held them without charges, trial, or legal representation. Our government has tortured them. Our government also invades our privacy, directly violating the fourth amendment to our constitution and of human rights.

But there is progress. Every five years since 1968, the UN has awarded its "Prize in the Field of Human Rights". There have been 47 winners, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., former US President Jimmy Carter, and Nelson and Winnie Mandela. In 1998, the OHCHR awarded a special prize to all anonymous human rights defenders. Organizational winners include Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Mano River Women's Peace Network in West Africa. High Commissioner Louise Arbour will announce the winners of the 2008 prize on the 60th anniversary, December 10.

So what does all of this mean to us? UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, "It is our duty to ensure that these rights are a living reality -- that they are known, understood, and enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. It is often those who most need their human rights protected, who also need to be informed that the Declaration exists -- and that it exists for them."

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights encompasses all human rights and protects all of us. It also recognizes that we all have a duty to improve our communities. In 1945, anti-Nazi theologian Martin Niemoller wrote, "In Germany, the Nazis came for the Communists, and I did not speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up because I am a Protestant. And then they came for me. And by that time there was no one left to speak up."

You can speak up. Read the declaration. Make a commitment to live by its principles in your personal and professional affairs. Sign the declaration. Add your name to the list of the 34,915 other individuals who have signed it, including me. Contact your legislators and insist that your government abide by these national and international principles. Tell President-elect Barack Obama that you want him to prosecute Americans who condoned or conducted torture.

For more information, go to www.un.org/rights. To read and sign the declaration, go to www.everyhumanhasrights.org.

Pat O'Malley is a consultant to nonprofit agencies.
Contact Pat at communitymatters@patomalley-consulting.com.
Read past columns at www.patomalley-consulting.com