



Student members of the WeStand human rights and social justice program at Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School are participating in a series of sessions dedicated to enhancing their understanding of social justice issues from around the world. All 35 members in Grades 11 and 12 are pictured above, with director Michael Xuereb standing at left. (Photo by JC Diaz)

WeStand program shows students the global village

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Youth Speak News

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The WeStand human rights and social justice program, an initiative started by staff at Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, offers senior students an opportunity to learn about social justice issues and to be agents of change in the world.

"The philosophy of our program is to give a sense of history so that students understand what has happened in the past, but also to connect it to situations that are happening today so that they can be students who are part of change," said Michael Xuereb, the director of WeStand and head of the religion department at Marshall McLuhan.

Currently in its first year, the 36 student members are participating in 15 hours of a series of after-school and weekend sessions, which began in February. In the sessions, the students are introduced to social justice issues from around the world, both from the past and the present.

Some of the issues discussed include racial discrimination, children's rights, aboriginal rights, water privatization and environmental awareness.

The program culminates on the Easter weekend with a trip to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, where students will participate in a Tools for Tolerance workshop offered by the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre. The museum is dedicated to challenging visitors to understand

the Holocaust in both historic and contemporary contexts and confront all forms of prejudice and discrimination in our world today.

"Without knowledge most people can't really act to change things," said Matthew Homen, a Grade 11 student and member of WeStand.

"No one really goes out and tries to make a difference only because they don't know what's happening. Once you gain that information like we have, it's a lot easier to go out and say, 'That's not right. We should try to change that.'"

For the past six years, junior students from Marshall McLuhan have had the opportunity to participate in a social justice program, the Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program. However, a human rights program for senior students did not exist for those wishing to learn more about social justice issues until Xuereb decided to create WeStand.

Through discussions and the opportunity to listen to a variety of inspirational speakers who discuss their experiences from around the world, participants learn to stand in solidarity for justice. For instance, one guest speaker, Paul Wellhauser from Nharo! Indigenous Art from Africa, spoke about fair trade products. He brought hand-made bracelets made by the Himba tribe in Namibia, which are being sold by the students to help the poor in that community, as well as to provide funds for their social justice program. And on April 5, another guest speaker,

Marina Nemat, a Catholic who was wrongly imprisoned and tortured as a youth, will discuss her experience.

The program is rooted in the Catholic social teaching of global solidarity. Xuereb said the program encourages students to see the world as a "global village," a term coined by the namesake of the school, Marshall McLuhan. Having two words written together as one, the name WeStand represents an image of global solidarity. The program will help students see people in the world as brother and sister, rather than as "the other," said Xuereb.

Kimberly Cabral, a Grade 11 student, said the sessions have helped her realize how human rights can be easily taken for granted in daily life.

"There are some kids in under-developed countries that don't have access to clean water," said Cabral. "So if I'm taking an hour shower, I'm really taking for granted that right that I have."

Participants also keep a memory book to write reflections about the guest lectures and various issues discussed.

Cabral was surprised by how little her fellow students knew about human rights issues.

"I believe that human rights are something that should be taught more to students," said Cabral. "I think that all students should have some sort of program at their school where they can talk about these issues."

(Gagliano, 20, is a life sciences student at the University of Toronto.)