

Afghan mission

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WINNIPEG — High school students at Gray Academy of Jewish Education got a crash course on Afghanistan and Canada's mission there as part of commemorations marking Raoul Wallenberg Day.

The day-long series of seminars on Jan 17 helped mark the day set aside by the government of Canada to honour the legacy of the Swedish diplomat who saved more than 100,000 Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

It was the third year in a row that Gray Academy, in conjunction with the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg, organized the high school student conference on human rights. Last year, students learned about Africa and heard from several African refugees living in Winnipeg.

The day began with a short film presentation on Afghanistan, followed by a keynote address by Capt. Dave Muralt of the Canadian Forces 17 Wing air force unit in Winnipeg and a veteran of the Afghan campaign. He spoke about Canada's role in Afghanistan and described "a day in the life of a soldier in Kandahar".

Following his address were several break-out sessions led by a number of guest speakers, including Daniel Ashrafi, an Iranian-born Jew who served in the Iranian air force under the Shah, who is currently living in Winnipeg (he spoke about terrorism and the Taliban); Prof. Richard Gordon, a theoretical biologist who started "Books With Wings," a project that ships medical and other books to universities in Afghanistan; Dr. Wassay Niazi, a specialist in microbiology and infectious diseases who was forced to leave Afghanistan by the Taliban; and his daughter, Meena Niazi, currently a student at the University of Manitoba, who spoke about growing up in Afghanistan and about its people, culture and hopes for the future.

Other speakers included Ariana Yaftali from the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council, who discussed the challenges faced by Afghans in adapting to life in Manitoba; and Alex Dobrota, a former *Globe and Mail* journalist, currently studying Law at McGill University, who was embedded with Canadian troops in Kandahar for three weeks last summer.

Progress in Afghanistan has been slow, Dobrota said. "But pulling out our troops now is unrealistic and would bring more harm than good. The Afghan army, the national police and the people depend on us. If the goal of our mission is to bring security to the region, even 2009 is too early to withdraw."

During the closing session, students honoured fallen soldiers from CFB Shilo, an armed forces base in western Manitoba, with a display of photos of those who have been killed in Afghanistan and a short film created by Gray Academy student Jorel Minuk picturing each of the fallen soldiers. David Rubenfeld, who is in Grade 12 at Gray Academy, lit a yahrzeit candle in memory of the soldiers.

The students also presented Joy Smith, MP for Winnipeg's Kildonan-St. Paul riding, with a book of letters to give to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. In their letters, the students expressed strong support for Canada's mission in Afghanistan and the pride they feel for its effort to promote security, democracy and human rights there.

"We hope that by exposing students to the history and challenges facing Afghanistan, they have gained a better understanding of the human rights issues involved," said Shelley Faintuch, the federation's director of community relations and a driving force behind the Wallenberg Day commemoration.

"Raoul Wallenberg demonstrated how one person can make a difference. With information at their fingertips, students will be empowered to develop action plans to help those in need in an area of the world where turmoil and human rights abuses have prevailed for so long."