



Sophomores Sydney Fader, Lucia Harrison, and Isabelle Kellezi write letters.

Teens put pen to paper for human rights

By Kris DiLorenzo

Students stopped texting and picked up pens and paper to participate in the first “Write-A-Thon” held by the Amnesty International Club at Ardsley High School last Friday, Dec. 7.

The event was part of “Write For Rights,” Amnesty International’s largest annual letter writing campaign to foreign officials on behalf of activists around the world who need aid, including protection and release from jail.

The students, who gathered at the school’s library, focused on five female activists. Club advisor Elizabeth Kim, who teaches global history, geography, and U.S. government and politics, said, “It was intentional this year to choose women activists or female political prisoners, in light of the midterm elections and #metoo movement.”

Approximately 30 students penned letters to Brazil’s president, Venezuela’s attorney general, India’s director general of police, Ukraine’s minister of the interior, and the Chargé d’Affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo.

The appeal to the Brazilian president

was to find the killer of city councillor Marielle Franco, who was murdered this past March for championing the rights of black women, LGBTQ people, and young people, and for condemning killings carried out by police.

Geraldine Chacón of Venezuela, now prohibited from leaving her country, spent four months in jail for working with an organization helping young people in the poorest areas of Caracas. Her case remains open, so she can be re-arrested at any time.

In India, the indigenous Adivasi people are being forced to sell off their lands to companies planning to build power plants. Pavitri Manjhi, head of her village council, is under threat for helping her people file formal complaints, and the police will not protect her.

Awad, who founded the Sudanese Women Human Rights Project, has been trapped in Egypt since 2012, where she is a UN-registered refugee. She was in the U.S. resettlement process, now stalled by the Trump administration’s travel ban against refugees from Muslim-majority countries. Egypt is threatening to deport her to Sudan, where she

could be further persecuted.

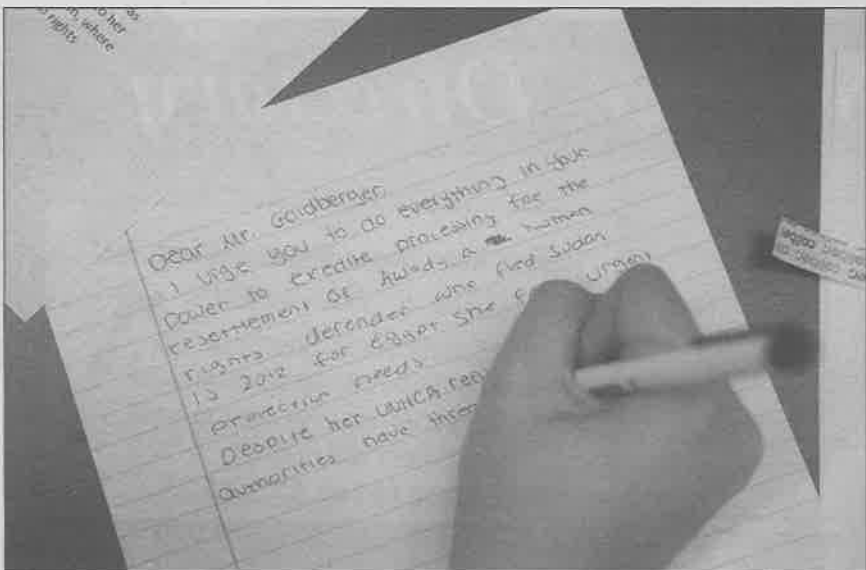
In Ukraine, Vitalina Koval, who organized a march in support of women and LGBTQ people, was attacked by a far-right group, and suffered chemical burns to her eyes. She is still being threatened.

Kim noted, “It’s not necessarily about the content of the letters. Of course we’re sending a message, but it’s the quantity that counts. We’re trying to make an impact with the sheer number of letters.”

The Write-A-Thon generated 150 missives, which were sent to Amnesty International USA in Manhattan. From there, they will be mailed to their intended recipients.

The club holds other events, such as the annual “Harmonies Fair” outside the Starbucks on Saw Mill River Road, where people can learn about Amnesty International’s mission and sign petitions. In February 2017, club members joined an Amnesty International protest near Trump Tower in Manhattan.

Regarding the letter-writing campaign, club president Kristina Wang, a senior, explained, “This year we hoped we could get our school involved and



Sophomore Jessie Katz pens a letter.

Amnesty

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make a name for ourselves.”

During the two-hour Write-A-Thon, seniors Loren Yu and Zarina Nabi, a club board member, shot photos and video of their fellow students for a montage destined for YouTube.

Yu joined the AI club “to get a broader perspective. I didn’t know much about current events. I was pretty boxed-in. I wanted to have a chance to make a change.”

Both students’ backgrounds attuned them to international issues. Yu’s parents, both from China, left to attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where they met. After living in New York City, they moved to Ardsley to raise their

daughter and son, Leon, a 2015 graduate of Ardsley High School who now studies music at Ithaca College.

Nabi’s mother emigrated from Russia circa 1990. Her father, a refugee from Afghanistan, fled to Pakistan, then came to the U.S. in about 1969. “Amnesty International opened me up to other topics,” Nabi stated. “Immigration hits really close to home.” (Her brother Masoud, a sophomore, is also a club member.)

Write For Rights has claimed successes in Chad, Turkey, El Salvador, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mexico, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

A poster board at the library entrance explained AI’s mission and the Write for Rights campaign. At the top was a quote from the late Robin Williams, who stated “No matter what people tell you, words and ideas can change the world.”