

Gandhi Jayanti and the Thakore Visiting Scholar Award

The legacy of Mahatma Gandhi has been honoured at Simon Fraser University since the unveiling of his memorial bust in Peace Square in 1970. Since 1991, The Institute for the Humanities, the Thakore Charitable Foundation and the India Club, as co-sponsors, have presented the Thakore Visiting Scholar Award to outstanding persons who have made society's well-being their lifetime work.

This year the thirteenth Thakore Visiting Scholar Award went to **War Child Canada** for its work with children affected by war. Accepting the award on behalf of War Child Canada was Dr. Eric Hoskins, president of War Child Canada. The following is a transcript of the address he gave at the ceremonies on October 2, 2003, at SFU. (Co-recipient Dr. Samantha Nutt, Executive Director, War Child Canada, was unfortunately unable for family reasons to attend the ceremonies.)

It is an honour to be here tonight and to accept, on behalf of War Child Canada, the prestigious Thakore Visiting Scholar Award. First, I want to apologize. I believe many of you were expecting my wife, the charity's co-founder and Executive Director, Dr Samantha Nutt, to be speaking with you tonight and that I'm no substitute for the real thing (at least, that's what she tells me), but unfortunately her father was undergoing hip surgery today and I know you join me in wishing him a very speedy recovery.

I would like to begin by saying how truly humbling it is for me, and indeed for everyone at War Child Canada, to be the recipient of an award given to such wonderful and inspiring people as Aung San Suu Kyi, Ursula Franklin, and Douglas Roche, to name a few...and it would be remiss of me not also to mention my old boss, Lloyd Axworthy, who as many of you may know, recently defected to this part of Canada. When we read through the names of previous recipients to the War Child Canada staff

the response was unanimous: "Wow, that's fantastic. Those are great people! So why are they giving it to us?" To which my only answer was "Well, I don't know, I guess they think we're doing something right."

I have to admit, around our office, particularly over the past year, we have spent a considerable amount of time watching news reports and wondering if in fact we *are* doing *anything* right as war once again dominates our political and economic landscape. I am sure many of you in this room have wondered the same thing, including people I have a great deal of admiration for, people like Jennifer Simons, to whom War Child Canada owes a great deal of gratitude (Jennifer Simons, you should know, gave War Child its first grant at a very critical early stage, and it is no exaggeration to say that without it I am not sure the charity would even exist today). "Security" has become the permission slip of the 21st century, in the name of which wars have been launched, international laws abandoned,

democratic principles strangled and missile programs expanded, all within two brief years.

In the midst of it all, notions of effecting social change can seem anachronistic: better suited to another time, another place, long before terrorism garnered the top spot on the political and policy agendas. In other words (and I have to give credit to Lloyd Axworthy here, as this is something he wrote on several of the policy proposals put forward by his staff in the Minister's office): good idea, *not very realistic*.

But if Sam and I have learned anything from our work with War Child Canada, and the sometimes long and difficult process of starting something new, it's that idealism and activism are just as necessary now as they were at any other time in our history, and making a tangible difference to the lives of those affected by war is a question of *will*, and *not* a question of opportunity. The opportunities certainly are there, but the real question is: are Canadians concerned enough to ACT? And the answer, we believe, is YES.

Providing opportunities for Canadians, and in particular youth, to get involved and make an important difference on a global level is precisely what War Child Canada aims to do. We really have a dual mandate: to provide humanitarian assistance to children and their families in war-torn countries, and to promote awareness and action in support of those affected by war. War Child Canada has humanitarian projects in war-torn countries around the world, working exclusively with local partners to implement educational, health, human rights and psychological support programs, for thousands of children and youth. Our overseas and domestic programs go hand in hand—the passion, energy and dedication of our many youth supporters generates both awareness for the cause and the much-needed resources for the projects we're

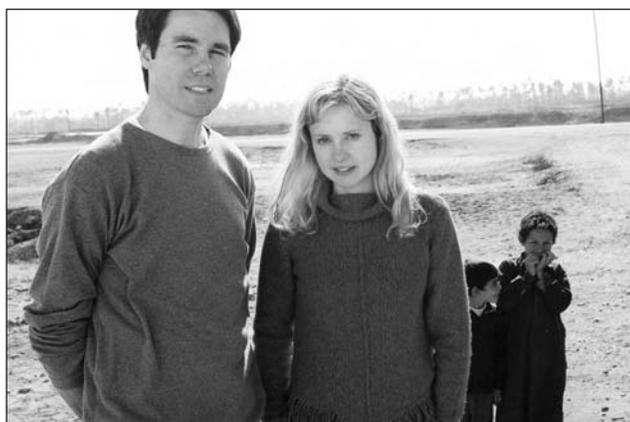
involved with internationally. Such projects are helping to provide skills and literacy training to women in Afghanistan, assisting with a children's hospital in Karbala, southern Iraq, and providing counselling and support to former child-soldiers in Sierra Leone, to name a few.

In the past two years alone, War Child Canada has directly engaged more than 100,000 young Canadians through its domestic programs. These programs include initiatives like Keep the Beat, a non-stop music marathon and educational program in support of war-affected children that last year involved more than 25,000 high school students and will launch again this November; "Just Act," a youth leadership program in support of the International Criminal Court and social justice issues; and No War Zone, an online community that provides opportunities for youth in Canada, and war-affected youth involved in our international projects, to work together to promote human rights, peace and sustainable development. No War Zone is a youth-to-youth, school-to-school initiative that aims to bridge geographic, social, religious and economic barriers by enabling participants to actually work together on development projects and see first-hand the impact of their efforts.

We also partner with teachers across Canada and around the world, providing creative ways, through lesson plans and curriculum development, to engage youth in their classrooms. As some of you may know, War Child works quite closely with the Canadian music industry and as such has been involved in several large music fundraising and outreach initiatives, the most recent of which was the Peace Songs CD which came out in April.

In short, I feel privileged to be involved in an organization of very dedicated people from across the country—staff, volunteers, teachers, music artists, youth leaders—and around the world who get up every day and are concerned enough to *act!*

Now, so far this evening I have talked about the importance of having the *will* to act on international issues, and of War Child Canada's work to effect social change by channelling that will into action. *But what I haven't talked about is why?*



Drs. Eric Hoskins and Samantha Nutt

Why does it matter that an estimated 23 million people have died in wars since the end of World War II, or that every day war kills or injures at least 2,000 children? We all know the U.N.'s estimates of the more than 300,000 child soldiers in the world, and of the 10,000 people in Sierra Leone who experienced amputations of their hands and feet because of the war in that country, which was, in large part, a war over diamonds. And many of us are aware that more than 3 million people have been killed in the past five years in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I could go on. None of this information is really new, and in my mind these numbers are so profoundly shocking in scale that it is too easy to forget that, in the end, *we are talking about people.*

Simply put, our common humanity should be, *indeed must be*, what compels us to act, *because war is the greatest of all human tragedies.* The scars are lifelong; the deaths, the damage and the depravity of war incomprehensible—what more reason do we need, as a global community, to strive for peace?

Along the same lines, and because this award recognises Gandhi's ideals of truth, non-violence, social justice, religious tolerance, education and ethics in politics, I want to share with you one very recent, and very personal, story of a friend of mine caught up in the tragedy of war whom I believe exemplifies these important values.

Two weeks after George W. Bush declared the war between Saddam Hussein's regime and the America-led "coalition of the willing" to be over, Sam and I knocked at the gate of an old and dear friend of ours, Dr Aquila Al-Hashimi, at her home in Baghdad.

Aquila, who was from a prominent Shi'a family near Karbala in Southern Iraq, held a PhD in French literature from the Sorbonne in Paris and was well respected among Iraq's educated elite. Although she worked in the Ministry and, by extension, for the Ba'ath party, she was not a member of Saddam's regime. Her primary responsibilities included monitoring the urgent food and medical needs of Iraqi civilians and negotiating humanitarian aid under the United Nation's Oil for Food Program since its inception in 1998. Most of my relief work in Iraq fell under Aquila's portfolio, and I knew she worked hard to secure visas and permissions on my behalf, facilitating my frequent entry into the country on humanitarian grounds.

One of my most vivid memories of Aquila is from a meeting at her office one evening in January, 2001, when she spoke to me about the Oil for Food Program and what she called the “indignity” (you may or may not agree with her) of the United Nations approval process. Not once did she accent her speech, as most bureaucrats were apt to do at that time for their own protection, with pledges of allegiance to the “benevolent” or “merciful” Saddam Hussein. By the time we finished drinking tea and catching up it was close to midnight. Aquila walked me to the front entrance of the Ministry and secured a driver for my return to the hotel. “It’s a question of money and business”, she reflected, as we said goodbye, “It is not about principles, this matter of Iraq.”

On this occasion more than two years later, the gate opened and a security guard ushered Sam and me into the front courtyard. Aquila emerged from her home in her dressing gown (we caught her by surprise) and she was anxiously tightening her belt and flattening her tightly coiled dark hair. She was fifty years of age and had never married. Aquila was so happy to see us—she hadn’t yet ventured out in the aftermath of the war. She lived with her brother and two nieces, six and ten years of age, who spoke briefly in impressive French, then giggled off to the kitchen to prepare tea. It was almost impossible to believe that only a few short weeks before our visit, this family was hunkered down in the living room while bullets ricocheted off the walls and grenades exploded all around them.

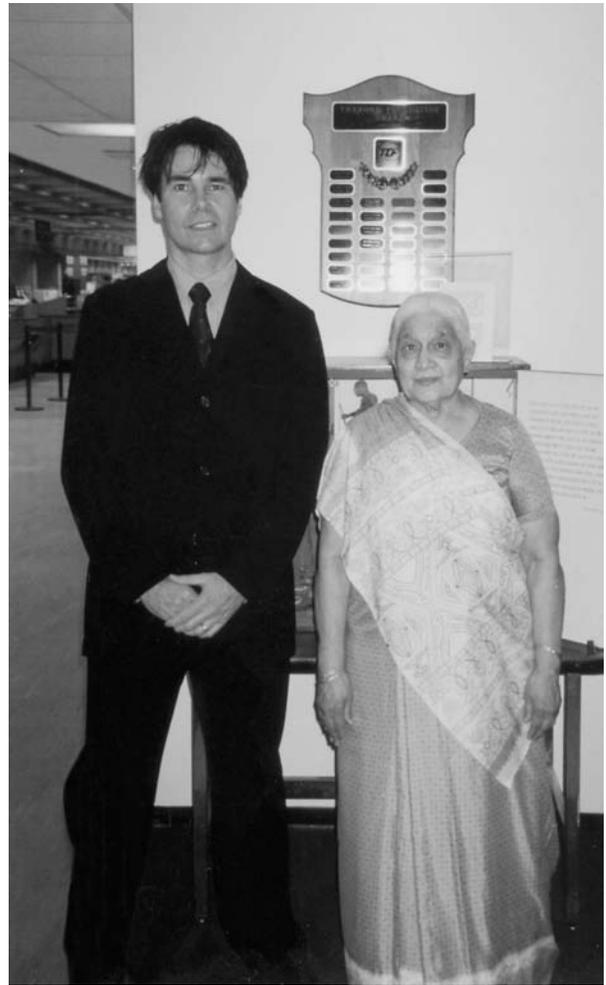
I noticed Aquila’s passport was on the coffee table. She said proudly, “I was showing my nieces my entry stamps from France and the United States from the 1980s. They could not believe it. Since before they were born, Iraqis have not been allowed to travel because of the sanctions. I explained to them that soon they will be able to go wherever they want—to visit the Eiffel tower or to go

swimming in the Mediterranean. It is beyond their imagination.”

Aquila and I had known each other for more than 12 years. I knew that amid the extensive corridors of the regime’s intelligence operations she had, without a doubt, been my guardian angel. It was far too easy to misstep and get thrown out of the country, or into some invisible Iraqi jail never to be heard from again. In all that time, however, I had never been able to have an honest conversation with her. What did she truly think of Saddam? Why did she choose to work for the Iraqi government? Why did she risk rousing suspicion, and possibly death, on my behalf?

Aquila said, “I cannot tell you how many times [intelligence officials] came to me about you.

What were you doing? Who did you work for? What did I know? But under Saddam, everyone suspected the next person. You could not even have a conversation in front of your children, in case they repeated it to their teacher or a neighbour, who might tell the Republican Guard. The only way to get things done was to play the game. Apart from Saddam’s inner circle, no one knew who might be ‘connected’, and at the lower levels of government very few wanted to be responsible for making decisions that they could later be blamed for. I would just say to anyone inquiring about you, ‘why are you so interested, how do you know Dr Eric? I will put in the file that you are the one who refused him permission to enter. I think [the officials] will be very eager to hear your explanation.’”



Eric Hoskins and Devi Thakore

Then there was the “big” question. As someone in receipt of numerous confidential documents who also oversaw virtually every application to the United Nations to import goods into Iraq, she must have known, or at least entertained rumours about, whether or not Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. “I swear to you”, Aquila told me, “if they had them, I would have heard about it. I was in that Ministry every day until late at night. I overheard many conversations at the highest levels. We had the weapons in 1991, I promise you that. Everything was destroyed after the Gulf War, but that doesn’t matter. You will not find one Iraqi who believes this was a war about Saddam’s weapons.”

As we were leaving, she turned to me and said, “I feel like the last thirty years have been confiscated from me. Now I want to live my life.”

A few weeks after our visit to her home, Aquila became one of three women appointed by the US administration to Iraq’s 25-member Governing Council. Despite her post-war yearnings for the “simple life”, Aquila was not the kind of woman who took a back seat to the political process. She was an activist—a courageous champion of the rights of Iraqi women and children—and I know she would do anything in her power to help her country when it needed her. What surprised us most was that it was widely speculated among the western media that Aquila was to become Iraq’s new ambassador to the United Nations. We could only assume, in view of her previous criticisms of the U.N.’s treatment of Iraq, that what motivated her was an overwhelming desire to control a process that had controlled her for so long. It is not a question we ever had the opportunity to ask her.

On September 20th, 2003, as she left her home in Baghdad, Aquila was brutally gunned down by six men firing assault rifles from a Toyota pick-up truck. She was planning to attend a key United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York four days later, at which President Bush was expected to seek support for reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Her assailants were never identified, but many theories regarding who the assailants might be were put forward: Ba’ath party loyalists displeased by her association with the American administration in Iraq, or members of one of a myriad of terrorist networks that infiltrated the country in the aftermath of the war. She was hit in the right side of her abdomen, causing extensive injury to her liver and pancreas. Her brother and driver were also shot in the attack. Footage of the scene carried by CNN, the BBC and other major networks included close-ups of a roadside dripping in blood. In

one of the camera shots, two little girls could be seen in the distance holding hands and watching on in horror. Sam and I recognised the two little girls as Aquila’s nieces. On September 21, the *Toronto Star* carried a full-page interview with former United Nations chief weapons inspector Hans Blix. From his home in Stockholm, Sweden, Blix asserted, as many others have done recently, that the U.S. and Britain “overinterpreted” intelligence reports that “claimed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction”, adding: “They do not seem to have come up with any evidence that [Iraq] retained weapons of mass destruction. I’m inclined to think that they were destroyed (by Iraq) in 1991... the threat is not what it was made out to be.”

I am not sure if any of us will even know the truth or whether, at this point in time, it even matters, because it does little to change the daily reality of Iraqi civilians. And I am not for a minute suggesting that Saddam Hussein was not the very brutal dictator everyone knew him to be (in fact, I have witnessed his brutality first hand). Nevertheless, on the same page as Blix’s interview there was a three-paragraph insert from the Associated Press entitled “Iraqi Council Member Wounded.” And four days later, precisely one week ago today, Aquila Al Hashimi died at a U.S. military hospital in Baghdad.

Sometimes the amount of suffering that exists in the world can seem insurmountable, *but it isn’t*. Sometimes finding a way to help can seem impossible, *but it isn’t*. And while the world may not always agree on whether war is “inevitable”, “necessary”, “unnecessary”, “avoidable” and the like, there is one thing we can all agree on: *the need for more peace in the world*. With more than 30 wars currently raging, peace is not a political statement—it is *an aspiration*—and one that deserves our constant attention and recognition. Gandhi once said: what difference does it make to the dead, the orphaned and

the homeless, whether the mad destruction was wrought in the name of totalitarianism, or the holy name of liberty and democracy?

No one understood this better than Aquila, and Sam and I would like to dedicate this evening’s award to her.

Thank you Jennifer Simons, Simon Fraser University, the Thakore family, the India Club, friends and colleagues.

