

Amnesty International: The Power for Change is in Our Hands...

By Amnesty Club Co-President Eman Bahrani, 12th Grade

Is it not logical to want to assuage the sufferings of individuals worldwide? I often wonder what motivates the pain inflicted on unknown others. Not a day goes by in which I do not hear of human rights violations, civil wars, bombings, or demeaning stereotypes. As Albert Camus writes in his novel *The Plague*, it is ignorance that causes actions of hate and clouds our perceptions of others. Although ignorance and actions fueled by anger suffuse the globe, philanthropy must nonetheless be performed with caution, consistency, and humility. It is not heroic, merely logical, for us students to educate ourselves as well as we can, to use our privileges not to speak for or represent a specific group of people, but rather to work for something that unites all human beings beyond religion, race, or nationality: the natural human right to life.

This is where Amnesty International comes in. An international organization with over 1.8 million members dedicated to the protection of human rights and human rights defenders, Amnesty “undertakes research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination” (Amnestyusa.org). It is not surprising that Awty has a high school Amnesty International Club, considering our internationality and emphasis on the appreciation of the diverse human beings with whom we live. As Co-Presidents of the club for the 2007-2008 school year, Seniors Zachary Goldman and I strive to promote an awareness of human rights violations that take place throughout the globe. Through consciousness of and opposition towards human rights abuses, governments, groups, or individuals who subjugate others must suffer national and international scrutiny, rendering obsolete any clandestine methods they may utilize to avoid such censure.

The sheer vastness of Amnesty’s campaigns and attentions not only enlightens, and often depresses, but also provides hope for a brighter future for millions of abused and repressed human beings worldwide. It is thus no wonder our club members and Amnesty activists often have a difficult time choosing a campaign or single human rights violation on which to take action for a certain period of time. Amnesty’s websites (Amnesty.org and Amnestyusa.org) are chock-full of newsletters, petitions, videos, and informative articles that seek to educate about and elicit resentment towards despicable human rights abuses. Zachary and I, and past Amnesty club presidents, have found that one of the most efficient ways to uphold and aid human rights is either by assigning each small group of students to a specific campaign or to a region of the globe. Club members can then choose causes or regions in which they are interested or feel personally invested and then write letters, create petitions, contact and influence congressmen, or alert the student body of their causes or human rights infringements within their chosen regions.

The real beauty of Amnesty International, however, is not in its myriad humanitarian efforts, but rather in its ease of accessibility and dissemination of information. Amnesty makes it simple for ordinary students and adults to not only learn about human rights issues, but to also take action to prevent and end them. Amnesty gives Awty students the power to affect the actions of

governments, the lives of minorities and journalists, and the futures of groups and populations worldwide. For example, our club at Awty has written letters to Russia's Kremlin, urging its leaders to sign a bill pressuring several other nations to end their use of child soldiers. Other letters we have written address the illegal arms trade in African nations, the human rights crisis in Darfur, the United States' government's management of Guantanamo, and the Jena Six trials. Although several people question whether our intended recipients actually take heed of letters written by teenagers, it is enough that governments and specific groups realize that students in different nations are aware of their actions and the measures they take to prevent, or exacerbate, human rights problems: They can no longer conceal their decisions behind closed doors. Furthermore, Awty's Amnesty club constantly sends out letters to prisoners of conscience, such as journalists incarcerated for their writing or citizens jailed for peacefully protesting their opinions. One such letter was sent to journalist Jennifer Latheef from the Maldives, who was imprisoned for ten years for photographing a peaceful protest. These cards of sympathy are sent not only to let the prisoner know that he or she is not alone, but also to tell his or her oppressors that they can no longer hide and must face pointed fingers.

Our most popular club event, however, is our annual Amnesty Soccer Tournament Fundraiser. We invite the high school student body to create teams of three, with each member giving three dollars to Amnesty upon registration. The teams then compete in a tournament during a lunch period, and the winning team receives gift certificates and other prizes. All the money made from the tournament benefits Amnesty International and its causes. In addition to instructions on creating petitions, getting them signed, and sending them to addresses provided online, Amnesty mails monthly newsletters to the presidents of registered school clubs on how to conduct meetings, discuss current events related to human rights, and perform specific projects.

Amnesty is not just a letter-writing club. We learn persuasive writing techniques in addition to realizing that power resides in our hands and minds to influence authorities and politicians. Amnesty International is a group for the people of the world, by the people of the world. It gives average citizens the power to force new levels of moral consciousness upon governments or independent groups, who mistakenly believe they are above international laws and ethical codes by stifling human potentiality and free expression.