

Nod of honour for local refugee advocate



By Cranbrook Daily Townsman

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A dedicated Cranbrook volunteer has been nominated for a prestigious national award.

Barb Ryeburn, a founding member for East Kootenay Friends of Burma, has been nominated for the Paul Yuzyk Award for Multiculturalism.

"It's quite an honour," said Ryeburn. "I don't think it's just for me, I think it's for everyone.

"Ever since I've lived here I've been blown away by how many people want to get involved."

The nomination was put forward by Ryeburn's partners in Friends of Burma, which works to sponsor refugees from the world's most troubled locations to escape to Canada.

"She volunteers thousands of hours every year to settle refugees into the community," said Friends of Burma's Shauna Jiminez. "She has taken refugees into her home, she has spent thousands of volunteer hours referring them to services, taking them to services, advocating for services,

and putting those services in place. It often involves hours of paperwork, hours on the phone, hours of driving, all out of her own expense money and all as a volunteer."

Since starting Friends of Burma in 1997, Ryeburn has helped close to 40 refugees come to Canada. Some have lived with Ryeburn, her husband Kim Eaton, and three children Maya, 22, Lukas, 19, and Simon, 17.

"My kids grew up with people from Ghana and India and Indonesia. I thought that was a great experience for them," said Ryeburn.

As well as her work with Friends of Burma, Ryeburn was the local coordinator for Canadian Crossroads International from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. In that role, Ryeburn helps East Kootenay residents prepare for volunteer placements in Ghana, Nepal, Indonesia and the Ivory Coast. She arranged visits to Canada for participants from India, Indonesia, Ghana and Suriname.

As well as working as a student services teacher at TM Roberts Ecole, Barb volunteers between 10 and 20 hours a week for Friends of Burma.

"There's always something, all the little things. It all does add up," said Ryeburn.

Sometimes the workload becomes a lot to handle, but the friendships she has formed with the refugees she has sponsored makes it all worthwhile.

"Sometimes I'm stressed out and I'll go up to Kimberley and be with the family with a little baby. I wouldn't think of anything else I'd rather be doing. They are lovely people and they add so much to our lives," said Ryeburn.

She also advocates constantly to change people's perceptions about refugees.

"You don't have a real idea until you meet someone who's a refugee," said Ryeburn.

"So many people say, oh, those refugees are taking our jobs, or they are terrorists, or we have to be careful because they are being smuggled in on boats.

"But every time you set up a new volunteer and they get to know these people and develop friendships, you see the community's attitude changing as more and more people hear the stories."

It's important to realize that refugees are fleeing life-threatening situations. Welcoming them to Canada is sometimes saving their lives, according to Ryeburn.

"We are privileged as Canadians. We do have to battle for things, but we have so many opportunities. When we can try and make that available for people who are in such dire conditions, I can't think of why you wouldn't want to do that."

The Paul Yuzyk Award acknowledges individuals across Canada who have made exceptional contributions to the integration of newcomers.

It includes a \$20,000 grant to be given to an eligible, registered not-for-profit Canadian organization of the recipient's choice.

Ryeburn said if she were to win the award, she will pledge the grant to Friends of Burma to sponsor more refugees.

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