

YOUTH ACTIVISM VITAL TO LANDMINE CAMPAIGN

Canadian youth are giving life to the Ottawa Convention on landmines. By raising awareness, they are playing a part in solving the devastating problem.

The small farming community of Morden in southern Manitoba is far removed from the deadly fields of landmines found in some strife-torn areas of South Asia.

But it's home base for two young Canadians determined to help end the humanitarian crisis of anti-personnel mines. Darryl Toews and Meredith Daun are co-founders of a voluntary organization working hard to promote the 1997 Ottawa Convention that launched the global ban on landmines.

The two are not alone. With support from Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC), the Canadian Red Cross and non-governmental organizations such as Mines Action Canada, Canadian youth are active in this country and overseas in raising public awareness, training volunteers and lobbying politicians about landmines.

"This is a solvable problem," says Toews, 35, a high school social studies teacher in Morden. "We in Manitoba are removed from the situation. But we can play an important part in helping solve the problem with other countries."

Toews and Daun, who met as volunteers five years ago and married in 2002, became interested in the landmines issue as university students. But it was through the Youth Mine Action Ambassador Program, a 10-month internship supported by FAC, the Canadian Red Cross and Mines Action Canada, that they became dedicated activists.

Since its inception seven years ago, the Ambassador Program has selected between 6 and 12 university graduates a year to visit schools, set up conferences and carry out fundraising in their home province.

As Manitoba's Youth Mines Ambassador in 1999-2000, Toews travelled to Bosnia to see the impact of landmines first-hand. Daun succeeded him the following year and visited Cambodia, meeting survivors and deminers to learn about the impact of landmines. "If one person is injured or killed, it affects the whole family," says Daun, 26, now a social worker with the Manitoba government.

Three years ago, the couple set up their local group, the Manitoba Campaign to Ban Landmines, to rally interest. They visit schools and work with Manitoba's current youth ambassador, Bequie Lake.



Humanitarian crisis: A Cambodian landmine survivor is fitted with a new prosthetic limb at the American Red Cross rehabilitation centre in Cambodia.



Meredith Daun wears a demining suit at a landmine awareness event as Manitoba's ambassador in the Youth Mine Action Ambassador Program (YMAAP) in 2000.

photo: courtesy of YMAAP