

Vaughan at-risk children's advocate speaks at UN

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By Chris Traber

Sara Austin has loaned her eloquent voice on behalf of at risk children for decades.

Earlier this month the world listened.

April 14, the Woodbridge resident addressed a special panel at United Nations headquarters in New York City.

Amid dignitaries representing several nations, Ms Austin celebrated the unanimous ratification of a treaty eight years in her making that empowers struggling children to seek and receive help from the UN when their rights have been violated.

The acceptance of her Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a landmark pact, introduces new mechanisms and a call to action when violations are evidenced. Prior, as the most widely approved convention in UN history, the treaty promised to protect children, including those forced into unsafe labour, war and the sex trade.

Now, thanks to Ms Austin's advocacy and authorship, marginalized children can make direct complaints to a UN committee tasked with upholding the Convention of the Rights of the Child. In essence, children seeking help will not be overlooked or neglected.

"It was a great day, a celebration and a victory for children," said the World Vision Canada director and York Region Children's Aid Society board vice-chairperson. "I was honoured to be part of the event. More importantly, it gives children access to international justice."

There was little the world could do to hold governments accountable before the pact was accepted. Her dedicated efforts has given individuals recourse. Potentially, millions of young lives could be impacted for the better.

Still, while numerous countries have legally endorsed the protocol and some 45 other nations have signed on to indicate their support, Canada has been absent.

Our nation is a world leader in supporting children's rights, she said, "But it's important Canada step up and give children access to this form of justice."

The impetus to draft and deliver the treaty was born of her experiences working in Asia, Africa and Latin America, said Ms Austin, who holds a Masters of Human Rights Law from Oxford University in the UK.

“I was struck by the gulf between the promises of governments and the lived reality of children,” she said. “I was looking for ways to hold governments accountable.”

Giving voice and opportunity to abused and marginalized children is her genuine calling in life, she said.

“It’s what I was made to do,” she said. “We need to understand children are not miniature human beings with miniature rights.”

Before her appointment to the York Region Children’s Aid Society board, Ms Austin was an active volunteer.

“Often children are struggling to survive, let alone thrive,” she said. “I am so glad for the opportunity with the region’s CAS and to work for children’s care, their protection and defending their rights in our community.

“CAS staff does that every day to meet their responsibilities to children. They fill gaps when families struggle.”