

Timely message of peace: An evening with grandson of Mahatma Gandhi

By Linda Maddaford

SASKATOON – The grandson of Mahatma Gandhi spoke recently in Saskatoon, sharing stories of his grandfather and describing the philosophy of non-violence which he taught and lived.

Dr. Arun Gandhi, founder of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence, was guest speaker at a cultural evening and supper hosted by the India Canada Cultural Association (ICCA) at Holy Spirit Church hall in fall 2008. Proceeds of the event went to the Saskatoon Food Bank and Learning Centre.

Arun spoke of his formative years in South Africa and the 18 months he spent in India with his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi.

Arun's father was the second son of Mahatma Gandhi and the only child to follow in his father's footsteps of non-violence. Arun and his two sisters were raised by parents who led by example. When the children misbehaved, the parents fasted or bore some sort of punishment because they believed it was their bad parenting that caused the child to misbehave. Arun and his sisters tried to be very good children as it made them feel too bad to sit and eat a meal when one or both of their parents were not eating.

Living in Africa in the 1940s at the height of apartheid was very difficult for a young boy. When Arun was thirteen he was beaten by white youths because his skin was too dark. Then, a few months later, he was beaten by black youths because his skin was too light. Angry and vowing revenge, Arun started to do physical exercise and weight training so that he could fight back. His parents decided that it was time to send him to India to visit his grandfather Mahatma Gandhi.

The Mahatma, by this time, had opened an ashram and was advocating India's peaceful independence from Great Britain. Even though the Mahatma was a very busy man, he made time for his angry, young grandson and taught Arun with great sensitivity and patience.

The event that left the strongest impression with Arun was one that occurred when he was 16 years old. He had to pick up his father, who was at a conference, by five o'clock, but Arun lost track of time at the movie theatre. When he arrived an hour late, his father asked him what had happened that had made him so late. Arun chose to lie and say their car was not finished being serviced at the town garage, not knowing that his father had already phoned the garage and knew that car was ready. The punishment his father took upon

himself was to walk the 18 miles back home on foot while Arun crept along behind him in the car. The long, torturous, five and a half hour journey, watching his father walk over rough roads and through sugar cane fields, left a lasting impression on him.

“All I can really say is that it has taught me clearly how I can personally and I am sure many people here can appreciate how to deal with a violent world in a truly non violent way. Thank you Dr Gandhi.”

During the program, Dr. David Kaplan on piano and Robert Helgason on guitar provided musical accompaniment to Navdeep Sidhu who sang deeply moving songs of loss and longing in several Indian dialects.

Pearl McNevin’s closing comments captured the thoughts and sentiments of all present: “I reiterate that we all here have heard of Mahatma Gandhi and recognize all the great things that he did in the world, in his time, but I really want to thank you, Dr Gandhi for sharing “your time with your grandfather” with us,” McNevin said. “It has taught me clearly how I can personally ... deal with a violent world in a truly non-violent way. Thank you Dr Gandhi.”