**SO, THE TITLE OF MY SHORT TALK TONIGHT IS-:**

**SOME EXPERIENCES OF AMNESTY PRESENTATIONS TO SCHOOLS**

**Whereby I am hoping share with you some of our experiences from when Will Roberts and I started doing Amnesty Presentations to schools some five or more years ago.**

**Back then of course we had no concept of the existing level of knowledge of Amnesty’s work amongst young people. However, we soon realised that this was pretty minimal and thus embarked on our first steep learning curve!**

**Most of our presentations were to students in the 14 to 17 age group, and we usually started by asking for a show of hands by those who had even heard of Amnesty, so out of a group of, say, 50 we would usually get about half a dozen hands go up, and even then ideas about what we do were sometimes a little vague!**

**On one occasion, for example, one student remarked:-**

**“ Oh yes, I’ve heard of Amnesty International - aren’t they just a bunch of old hippies?” And while I was flattered by being called a ’hippy’, I wasn’t quite so keen on the ’old’ bit!**

**Although we spoke mainly to secondary school students in years 10/11 & 12, we also visited a couple of junior schools, as well as a few colleges and even universities, mostly in Warwickshire, but also in Birmingham, Coventry, Banbury and Bicester, as well as one or two other outlying areas (although we had to draw the line at requests for a 10-minute assembly 40 plus miles away - a request that we did actually get on more than one occasion!).**

**Incidentally, some of you might not be aware that because of it’s stance in favour of abortion and contraception Amnesty is not welcome in most Catholic schools, and even though we did do a presentation to Cardinal Wiseman school in Coventry the school priest sat in to make sure we said nothing ‘untoward’, which of course we didn’t!**

**(except perhaps when asked by a student for an example of a Prisoner of Conscience I turned to the Padre and said “Well I think Jesus Christ is probably a good example of that don’t you Father? As he was imprisoned, abused, tortured and eventually executed for his beliefs and for defending human rights!” - to which of course he had to agree!.**

**Because of most students limited knowledge of the work of AI we usually started our presentations by lighting an Amnesty candle and asking for the lights to be turned off.**

**One of us would then repeat the old (Chinese?) saying “It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness”, then explain what this means, coupled with the meaning of the Amnesty ‘candle and barbed wire’ logo.**

**We often found short, snappy sound bites like the one I’ve just mentioned quite useful, another one being Edmund Burke’s 18th century statement “All that it takes for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing” - a useful way of getting attention and summarising Amnesty‘s overall philosophy.**

**I would then usually follow this with a summary of Amnesty’s background, such as who set it up and why, where it started, when and what prompted Peter Benenson to do so etc.**

**Will would then outline the various campaigns currently on Amnesty’s schedule and how local groups could become involved in them. In doing so we would also explain that, if required, we would help them set up their own semi-autonomous Amnesty Group.**

**No matter how much preparation we did, however, on a few occasions were taken by surprise by unexpected questions. For example when speaking to sixth formers at Kingsley School in Leamington we were talking about the limits on freedom imposed by some oppressive regimes on its people when one girl put her hand up to ask:-**

**“What exactly do you mean by freedom?!” Which really took us aback!**

**I looked at Will and said “Blimey - that’s actually a very good question”! (or words to that effect!).**

**Will responded to that by saying :- “Well basically it’s those freedoms you already benefit from, but perhaps take for granted until you lose them!” and I said**

**“For example the freedom of thought and speech, the freedom to write and say almost whatever you like (as long as it is not harmful or offensive of course), as well as the freedom to listen to anything, to read and watch what you want, to meet whoever you like, vote for whoever you want and travel freely wherever you like, because in some countries you are not allowed to do all of these things”**

**On another occasion we had been banging on for several minutes about capital punishment until I noticed it had gone rather quiet, then one young lad put up his hand and asked “What exactly is capital punishment, sir?!”**

**Which made us realise we should have explained at the outset that this meant the death penalty of course!**

**Although we eventually got used to it, initially it was a little disconcerting when asking how many students agreed with the death penalty to see how many hands went up, and that In co-educational schools that would be mostly the boys.**

**However, we did of course confirm that they had every right to believe that if they wished, but we would then nearly always show the clip of Jeremy Irons talking about the death penalty.**

***Has everyone here seen this? If not, I’ll just take a couple of minutes to show it now if we’ve got time?***

**In order to demonstrate what it might feel like to be intimidated by a despotic regime before the start of our presentations we would give out a sealed letter to half a dozen or so randomly selected students with instructions to open it after the meeting.**

**When they did so they would find an “official” letter, a copy of which I just happen to have here - and this is what it said:-**

**As you can imagine, the reaction of those receiving this letter would usually be along the lines of “Why - I haven’t done anything?!” or “This isn’t fair! etc. etc., especially when we assured them that this text was based on a genuine letter actually sent by one Middle Eastern state to those attending a human rights meeting!**

**Another favourite ’attention-grabber’ of ours was to talk about stoning to death, which a number of our audiences couldn’t believe still went on in this day and age.**

**“But that the sort of thing they used to do in the bible!” to quote one astonished young student.**

**Will would then go into graphic detail as to how the process was carried out, and I would produce three “stones” of different sizes (but made of papier mache and actually very light) - a small one - which wouldn’t be used as it wouldn’t**

**hurt enough - a much larger one - which again wouldn’t be used as it would kill too quickly - and the favourite medium sized stone - which would definitely hurt and eventually kill, but not too quickly!**

**I would then toss them to somebody in the audience (usually anyone who’d been playing up or not paying attention) and who of course didn’t know what they were made of until they received them!**

**Yet another attention grabber was to ask an older student group how many were learning to drive, then as the hands went up Will would turn to me in mock horror and say something like “I don’t believe it, John, some girls have even put their hands up!”, which of course would prompt the expected reaction from those females present!**

**However, we would of course then go on to explain that this was to demonstrate that there were in fact some countries in the world where women were not permitted to drive!**

**Bearing in mind the ethnic mix of some of the audiences we faced, including those from the countries whose human rights record we had been extremely critical of, we were at pains to point out that we weren’t simply throwing these accusations at those countries other than us in the West, as we are perfect and they aren’t, but that countries like the UK (e.g. those in Immigration Detention Centres), the USA (e.g Donald Trump’s policies on Mexican migrants and those of the Muslim faith etc), Canada (treatment of indigenous tribes in the oil tar fields of Alberta) and Australia (detention of asylum seekers on offshore uninhabited islands) were also responsible for blatant breaches of human rights.**

**The two main groups we found to be the most helpful in establishing Amnesty Student Groups were firstly those teachers (such as Chrissie at Kineton High School and Nadia now at Southam College), without whose support forming such groups would have been almost impossible, and of course the most motivated and enthusiastic students themselves, usually, but not always, in the upper age groups.**

**The two basic problems posed by these two groups, however, are that inevitably teachers retire or move on, and the most active and organised sixth formers leave, and groups then often dissolve (e.g. this has happened at Myton School, Kenilworth Sixth Form, Mid-Warwickshire College and Coventry University). While talking about problems I will also mention now that, for some reason I’ve never been made aware of we’ve never been able to do a Presentation to Warwick School.**

**Our only hope is that when such key individuals do move on, they take their support of Amnesty and their passion for defending human rights with them to pass on to others.**

**(IF TIME ASK CHRISSIE ABOUT ABBIE AT KINETON - ? STUDYING HUMAN RIGHTS IN HONG KONG?!)**

**I hope I have given you all something of an insight into some**

**of our experiences in talking to students about the work of Amnesty, BUT DOES ANYBODY HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?**

**JOHN PAYTON October 2019**