

## Walking for Gaza: A pilgrimage through Hastings Highlands



By Kaitlin Sylvester

Amidst the serene landscapes and winding roads of Hastings Highlands, a pilgrimage for peace unfolds. Organized by Erin Crecelius and other local activists, the pilgrimage was a peaceful protest against the violence happening against Palestine. At its core, the March 25 pilgrimage was a journey guided by intention and a commitment to nonviolent solidarity. It is not merely a walk; but is a spiritual endeavor. Beginning at 5 a.m. at Whitney Park the walkers planned to cover a route 41.4 kilometres long, representing the length from Gaza to Rafah, a similar distance to that of people fleeing violence in Palestine. Indigenous elder, Margaret Haskin performed a Smudging Ceremony for the early morning walkers, sending them on their journey along old Hwy. 127, through Lake St. Peter, and ultimately into Maynooth. Stops were pre-selected roughly every 5 km so interested parties could join in for sections of the walk based on their ability and capacity. One pilgrim did the full 41.4 kilometre walk, arriving at the Maynooth UC Church shortly after 6 p.m. where he and other walkers were welcomed with hearty soup, music, and prayers. Volunteer supporters were a crucial part of the day with folks contributing rides, event coordination, and food to the pilgrims. Long distance walker, Peter Morrison said the group were pleasantly surprised by the amount of community support they received. "We had a couple nice surprises," said Morrison. "We had one lady from the church [who] picked up timbits and she drove down the highway until she found us." "There's something about walking that gives you time to reflect," said Crecelius, who meticulously designed articles for contemplation along the route. Each station was marked with a wooden cross, with bags that included scripture readings, Palestinian art, and notebooks for personal reflections. "It is a protest because we're making a statement," said Crecelius, "these people [in Gaza] are starving and we're walking in solidarity with them." Typically, a pilgrimage is not only a physical walk but a symbolic passage towards understanding and reconciliation. "I thought the stations would be a good idea," said Crecelius. "Since this wouldn't be a traditional pilgrimage with a thousand people walking, this way people could reflect and commune with the issue on a more personal level." Morrison said of the contemplation bags, "some of that was eye opening. You know what you see on the news, but the news doesn't cover all the details of what's going on to the people there." To celebrate the pilgrims journey, almost thirty people were waiting in celebration at the Maynooth United Church. Local musician Catherine Loa, welcomed the pilgrims back with an uplifting song on the piano, as well as sharing her own thoughts on music, meditation, and peace. At the celebration dinner Crecelius shared that the pilgrims had raised over one thousand dollars to be donated to Palestinian families in need. The group was given an extra boost of good news Monday morning when word came that the United Nations Security Council demanded an immediate Gaza ceasefire. Spirits were high throughout the day as local activists showed up to lend their support in whatever ways they could. Whether through movement, coordination or cooking, Hastings Highlands locals took to the streets to stand with Palestinians.