What is the Universal declaration of Human Rights?

The traumatic events of the Second World War brought home that human rights are not always universally respected. The extermination of almost 17 million people during the Holocaust, including 6 million Jews, horrified the entire world. After the war, governments worldwide made a concerted effort to foster international peace and prevent conflict. This resulted in the establishment of the United Nations in June 1945.

In 1948, representative from 50 member states of the United Nations came together under the guidance of Eleanor Roosevelt (First Lady of the United States 1933-1945) to devise a list of all the human rights that everybody across the world should enjoy.

On 10th December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations announced the Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – 30 rights and freedoms that belong to us all. 74 years on and the rights they included continue to form the basis for all international human rights law.

Eleanor Roosevelt was heavily involved in championing civil rights and social activism. She was appointed chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights which drafted the UDHR. On the tenth anniversary of the UDHR, Eleanor gave a speech at the United Nations called ‘Where Do Human Rights Begin?’ Part of her speech has become famous for capturing the reason why human rights are for every one of us, in all parts of our daily lives:

‘Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet, they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he/she lives in; the school or college he/she attends; the factory, farm, or office where he/she works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for

progress in the larger world’

Of the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 1 and 2 encompass all the rest.

Article 1: We are all born free. We all have our own thoughts and ideas and we should all be treated in the same way.

Article 2: The rights in the UDHR belong to everyone, no matter who we are, where we’re from, or whatever we believe.

(Taken and adapted from Amnesty International UK website)