

Human trafficking presentation inspires Glastonbury crowd

By Steve Smith, Reminder News

The harsh reality that human trafficking is not just taking place overseas, but right here in Connecticut, was one of the key points driven home at a powerful performance in Glastonbury on Oct. 9.

More than 100 people from Glastonbury and the surrounding area attended the event at the Riverfront Community Center, hosted by the Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative. The event was called "Riding the Turnpike – Modern Slavery in our Neighborhoods, Our State" and featured the HartBeat Ensemble portraying scenes based on the book "The Berlin Turnpike" by Raymond Bechard.

Actors Debra Walsh, Taneisha Duggan and Vanessa Butler performed gritty, honest and sometimes-graphic scenes, set mostly in motels on the Berlin Turnpike, and places like Union Station in Hartford, of how people are lured into sex trafficking, what life within that world is like, and the toll it can take on a person over years.

In one scene, a victim-turned-predator lures a runaway into the sex trade life. In another scene, a young woman tells the story of how her boyfriend leveraged her love and addictions to convince her to prostitute herself for drugs.

Between scenes, panelists Arati Sureddi, founder of LOTUS Alliance, which addresses human trafficking and forced labor through funding of job training for adult survivors and William Rivera, director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Immigration Practice for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, discussed what they saw, and responded to audience questions.

Rivera said some of the scenes were based on actual cases with which he was familiar.

"Many of the actual stories that you heard tonight are actually happening on a regular basis, in any given town," he said. "Whether it's a town with few resources, or very affluent with resources, what we're hearing portrayed tonight is very accurate."

Runaways, Rivera said, are particularly vulnerable because they are running away from something. "It's just a matter of time before someone 'nice' comes along and recognizes the vulnerabilities. They understand that they haven't eaten, or haven't rested. Often times you can pick the kids out," Rivera said. "So many of the kids that we've responded to – it's like they have a tattoo on their head that reads 'I'm vulnerable. Pick me.'"

Rivera said children who are trafficked are not from third-world countries.

"They are not from other countries," he said. "They are coming from your neighborhoods. They are kids in your schools, kids from affluent communities, poor communities – we're talking about American kids."

"Twenty-five percent of individuals, globally, who abuse a child, are Americans doing so in America," Sureddi said. "There's a concept that people go overseas to abuse children, but you'd never go overseas to abuse a child before first doing so in your own space. Also, the access to technology has facilitated that, because a lot of people look at very inappropriate media online, and there are children who have access to that."

The final scene showed what happened to the three characters later in their lives. One struggled with regaining a sense of normalcy, feeling that there are no support systems for older adults who have been victimized for decades; the second character was resigned and appeared to enjoy being in the Vegas sex trade, and the third simply said, "Me? Dead."

After the audience's initial shock, the performers received rousing applause.

Sureddi said, after the performance, that she was impressed with the GMLKCI.

"I'm blown away by the fact that Glastonbury has this," she said. "I'd like to see more communities have such an initiative."

She added that she felt the event was successful because of the "healthy, wide range" of people who turned out.

Attendees were encouraged to speak with several advocacy groups, who were also at the event, in the hopes of possibly becoming more involved. Groups included the LOTUS Alliance, Community Partners in Action, Love 146, International Institute of Connecticut, and The Underground.

"We think that getting people together to talk about issues that are important is good for our community and good for everyone who attends," said GMLKCI President Darwin Kovacs. "We think that meaningful relationships build strong communities, and we hope we can get that started this evening."

"Our aim is to honor [King's] actions, and his words," added GMLKCI's Diane Lucas, who called human trafficking an "issue that needs a voice, a story, in order to inspire all of us to action."

"We've also found that, in order to do this, one must make a personal connection to those who are survivors, and not just view them as 'the other' – someone who could not possibly be one of us," Lucas said. "Inaction occurs when we separate ourselves from people in this world."

The 14th annual Martin Luther King Day Celebration will take place January 19, 2015, at Smith Middle School.

For more information, visit <http://www.glastonburymlkci.org>.



Actors Vanessa Butler (left) and Debra Walsh perform a scene from "Riding the Turnpike," a presentation on human trafficking, at the Riverfront Community Center in Glastonbury on Oct. 9. Photo by Steve Smith



Arati Sureddi (left), founder of the LOTUS Alliance, looks on as William Rivera, Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs for the Department of Children and Families reacts to the theatrical performance about human trafficking. Photo by Steve Smith



A crowd of more than 100 packed into the Riverfront Community Center for the powerful performance. Photo by Steve Smith



HartBeat Director Steven Raider-Ginsburg said the stories can be difficult to listen to, but can also be inspiring. Photo by Steve Smith



(L-r) Actors Debra Walsh, Vanessa Butler and Taneisha Duggan perform a scene that takes place on the Berlin Turnpike. Photo by Steve Smith



Vanessa Butler acts out a scene where her character explains how a boyfriend lured her into the sex trade. Photo by Steve Smith



Victoria reads a spoken word piece about a survivor of sex trafficking. Photo by Steve Smith



Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative President Darwin Kovacs said he hoped the event with inspire people to action. Photo by Steve Smith



The Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative's Diane Lucas said she hopes a personal connection was made for the audience. Photo by Steve Smith