

Young Actors Present Social Issues At Martin Luther King Event



Steve Smith Staff Writer

The Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative marked Dr. King's birthday one day early with a Community Conversation on Jan. 15 at the Riverfront Community Center.

Student actors from the Looking In Theater – a group from the Greater Hartford Magnet School of the Arts – performed four scenes, each one presenting a currently topical issue such as gender identity, racial profiling, cyberbullying, and the stereotyping of Muslims.

The audience was then able to ask questions of the characters.

In the first scene, a man named Ian, working the door at a dance, was approached by what appeared to be two young women, but one of them introduced herself as 'Bill,' causing confusion.

"What bathroom is she going to use," asked Ian, played by 17-year-old West Hartford resident Ryan Shearin.

Bill, played by Kat Duffner, a 17-year-old from Newington, explained that he was transgender, and learned he was male around the age of 10, but only came out recently to his family and friends.

"You seemed offended by him referring to you as a same sex couple. What would have been more appropriate?" asked one audience member.

Kallie, Bill's girlfriend in the scene (played by Ananicole Rumley, also from Newington), replied by saying that Ian could have asked politely.

"He was obviously very confused. I just thought it would have been easier if he just asked," Kallie said.

"Should you not have been prepared for a negative reaction from people?" another audience asked.

"I wasn't expecting everyone to be super-positive about it," Bill said. "I expected a couple of strange looks at the dance. I didn't expect anyone to be as openly transphobic as he was about it."

"We were making an effort to make same sex couples more comfortable at the dance," Ian said. "I just wasn't expecting something like this. I did my best. I was just a caught a little off guard with the situation."

In another scene, Ian (also played by Shearin, but not necessarily the same character) learns that his friend Brad (played by Marcus Manson, 17, of Windsor) is a Muslim.

"No, you're not a terrorist," Ian said, reacting to the news that his friend is celebrating Ramadan. "You don't even look like one. You don't have one of those towel-head things."

"Being Muslim isn't about what you wear," Brad said. "It's a religion."

An audience member asked Brad if he had delayed sharing with Ian that he was Muslim.

"I felt like it was a part of who I was, so I didn't have to come out and say I was Muslim when I met him," Brad said. "I thought we could just be friends. He should accept me as who I am, because we are friends."

Brad added that while he considered the friendship over, if Ian apologized, he would "think about it."

"They're global, they're local – these things do happen, and they do happen here in Glastonbury, as in every town in the state," said Jonathan Gillman, Looking In Theatre director.

Audience members praised the group for presenting the topics and initiating discussion.

"My weakness is on the gender issues," one woman in the audience said. "It's very perplexing to me, so I appreciate the chance to learn a little bit more, and understand what I don't know."

U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy also paid a surprise visit to the event. Murphy praised the actors and spoke about how the topics they covered are relevant to his preparations for working with the incoming administration.

"You guys are covering an amazing amount of material, and really challenging yourself with some big, important issues," Murphy said. "I feel the angst and anxiety that exists, politically, in the state and across the country. We're sitting here today talking about values like inclusion, fighting back against things like bullying, and this comes in a moment when we are inaugurating a president – and I'm not in the business of pulling punches – who essentially, was elected by bullying and by preaching against inclusiveness."

Murphy said that he, and many people, are wondering what direction the country is going in, and what to do next.

"I know the next couple of years are going to be hard, but they will be the most important ones that I am engaged in," Murphy said, urging the audience to work for social justice locally. "If there is going to be a bully in the White House – somebody who seems to condone name-calling – then we have to do what is necessary in our local schools, to give teachers and administrators new tools with which to confront folks who think that they have a license to push people around. We're going to have to do that in our workplaces. We're going to have to do that in our community centers, and our churches. Everyplace that people exist, we're going to have to double-down to build inclusive societies with protections for people who are vulnerable."

For more information, visit www.glastonburymkci.org.



Student actors Ananicole Rumley, Ashley Berrios, and Kat Duffner portray a scene in which Berrios' character is accused of being a thief because of her nationality.



Dean Alfred Carter, the emcee for the event, asked audience members who have been affected by social injustice, to speak about their experiences.



U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy appeared at the event, and spoke about social justice issues he and other senators anticipate facing in the near future.



Kat Duffner (left), Ryan Shearin, and Ashley Berrios perform a scene in which they watch a friend prepare to commit suicide while live-streaming it online.



Pilar, 11, collects items for the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut's towel drive for the National Day of Service Initiative at the coalition's table at the event. Those attending were asked to bring a new bath towel and women's toiletries, which will be given to women in local shelters.



U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy poses with the teen actors of the Looking In Theatre.



Darwin Kovacs, of the Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative, thanked all of the presenters and representatives of social justice advocacy groups in attendance.