



Foxboro High students get a somber lesson on dating violence

Play educates high schoolers about destructive relationships

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BY EMILY O'DONNELL SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

FOXBORO- It's not easy to get high schoolers to sit still for any stretch of time.



But in Foxboro High School's auditorium Wednesday morning, all was quiet, save for the voice of Rydia Q. Vielehr, who was performing a one-woman show called "The Yellow Dress," a play about teen dating violence. The drama was presented by Deana's Educational Theater, a Massachusetts-based group addressing teen dating violence, and was funded by HUGS, a local volunteer group of town officials and medical professionals advocating for abuse prevention.

"The Yellow Dress," which pulls from real stories of domestic abuse victims - or survivors, as support groups like New Hope refer to them - follows Anna, a 16-year-old high school student, as she speaks about her relationship with her boyfriend, Rick.

In the hour-long drama, Anna tells the audience that Rick was sweet at first, but became controlling and emotionally abusive over time. He orders for her at restaurants, learns her passwords to keep tabs on her email and phone, calls her insulting names, criticizes her clothes and isolates Anna from her friends - all warning signs of an abusive relationship.

After the abuse turns physical, the play ends with a tragic, yet powerful scene.

After Vielehr took her bow, the actress broke character for a discussion with the 220 sophomore and junior Foxboro High School students in attendance, highlighting the educational point of the play. She encouraged students facing abuse to contact organizations offering support for domestic abuse, such as Attleboro-based New Hope.

New Hope representatives Meghan Witherell and Allison Lombardi were in the lobby talking to students about teen violence. The women were there in partnership with HUGS, which funded the event through money raised by the group's annual charity walk. HUGS, which stands for "Help Us Get Safe," advocates for public awareness about dating and domestic violence, as well as victim support. The nonprofit group includes Police Chief Ed O'Leary; Vicki Lowe, director of human services and the council on aging; Public Health Nurse Karacek; and Cindy Peterson, head of Brigham and Women's/Mass General Health Care Center at Patriot Place.



Maura Schaeffer Jobin, the president of Foxboro HUGS, said she hopes "The Yellow Dress" resonated with students. "This is a very powerful play and I really think the students will take it with them," Jobin said. "Education is key, especially among teenagers, who may not know what's appropriate and inappropriate in dating relationships."



Rydia Q. Vielehr from Deana's Educational Theater performs a one-woman play "The Yellow Dress," about relationship violence, before an audience of Foxboro High School students Wednesday. (Staff photo by Martin Gavin)

O'Leary, a longtime advocate of domestic violence prevention, said advocacy is necessary because Americans need to make more progress in addressing the problem.

The most recent national statistics confirm O'Leary's remarks. Approximately 9 percent of high school students have reported being physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Among those who are victims of rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner, 22 percent of women and 15 percent of men said they first experienced some form of violence between ages 11 and 17. According to Witherell, educating young people when they first start dating - around age 12 or 13 - can help prevent young people from becoming violent later in life.

For more information, contact New Hope's 24-hour hotline at 1-800-323-4673, or call the Foxboro HUGS confidential phone line at 508-698-8784.

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