



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published January 16th, 2013

"Changing the World 101"

Impassioned speaker challenges SMC students, community members into action

By Lou Fancher

Saint Mary's College launched Jan Term's 2013 "Inspired" Speaker Series on Jan. 8 with a dynamic, rousing call to action from Ignited Leadership founder Jason Connell.

The 26-year old seeker of social justice and world traveler would have every reason to sit down and take a rest, but instead, he paced like a caged cheetah across the Soda Center stage; unfurling tender, personal stories and hurling inspirational challenges to the approximately 100 member audience.

"One of the reasons I'm happy to be here is that despite the small size of SMC, you have more service hours per student than almost any other college in the country," he began.

Describing the 17-year-old Chinese mother he once saw digging food out of the trash to feed the baby she held wrapped in a blanket, Connell said, "That's not a kind of poverty we see in this country. I shifted from partying in every country I could visit to seeing what kind of difference I could make in the world."

Connell offered a two-sided invitation; stressing the importance of admitting that no one person can save the world while suggesting every single person could take steps to build a better community. Promising to accept private questions after the lecture, share his email address, and send digital copies of his lecture notes, Connell dove into the dark, evil world he is devoted to changing.

"The Virgin Cleanse Myth," he announced, describing a much-believed, clearly erroneous story Sowetans are led to believe will eradicate the HIV-AIDS virus. "(People with AIDS) are told, if they have sex with people who are assuredly virgins-two year olds, three year olds, who are kidnapped and raped-you will be cleansed," he said.

With an HIV-AIDS rate of 17.8 percent, meaning one in six South Africans are infected, lack of education and a desperate population leads to tragedy beyond imagination. "What would you do, if the cards had been dealt differently?" Connell asked, suggesting the very thought made his heart hurt and his head spin.

"These problems are not just in Soweto," he claimed, "they wrap themselves around the world."

Embracing the enormity of poverty, genocide, global warming, water deprivations and other global concerns can make a person shut down, Connell said. "Completely powerless: that's how I have felt," he admitted. "But it's a false feeling."

To prove his point, Connell jumped off the dire bandwagon of world problems and planted his feet firmly in Global Camps Africa (GCA), an example of solutions. GCA takes kids in dire poverty and places them in the countryside at what is, essentially, a classic American summer camp. The camp has a dual purpose: to lift kids out of poverty and prevent the spread of HIV.

"Study after study shows the kids who attend have lower HIV rates," Connell said. "They commit fewer crimes, go to school more often, and they're happier. The way you change the world is working with small groups of individuals."

Perhaps sensing his message had strayed to abstraction, Connell moved to Uganda, recalling the personal drama of a young woman whose family was brutally murdered by the Lord's Resistance Army. The warring faction, whose phenomenal levels of violence are unimaginable to Americans (except, Connell noted, in video games he said cause gamers to mistake violence for entertainment), spared the young woman's life because she was pregnant and killing a woman bearing a child was one step beyond their moral code.

"If they came to Moraga, what would you do?" he asked. "You'd call the cops, the military, security forces." Without those protections, Connell said micro-lending was an instant, easy first step towards making a difference.

"In much of the developing world, 25 bucks is a lot of money. It's enough to start a business," he said.

Encouraging everyone to work with reputable, reliable agencies and organizations, especially when first embarking on global service, Connell said Kiva.org was a well-run, flexible micro-lending organization.

Questions from the audience followed up on his advice to blend passion and business-savvy marketing into a clear, personal directive.

"We don't know what happens when we die," he said. "What we know is that we are here now. It's obvious: the thing to do is to lead your life with passion, with confidence. Go out and improve the quality of life on earth."

"Inspired" Speakers Series Continues Through January at SMC

Kaya Oakes, "Unlikely Inspiration"

Tuesday, Jan. 22 at 7 p.m., Soda Activity Center

Author of *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture*, the poetry collection *Telegraph and Radical Reinvention: An Unlikely Return to the Catholic Church*, Oakes is also co-founder of Kitchen Sink, winner of the Utne Independent Press Award for Best New Magazine and teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

Lisa Kristine, "Shining a Light on Modern-Day Slavery"

Thursday, Jan. 31 at 7 p.m., Soda Activity Center

Acclaimed humanitarian photographer, Kristine spent a year traveling the world to document modern-day slavery - into the heart of broiling brick kilns, down rickety mine shafts, and into the hidden lairs of sex slavery. Her recent book, *Slavery*, has received global attention. She will share the stories behind her images - and how she bore witness to horrible abuses and to astonishing glimpses of the indomitable human spirit.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA