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World AIDS Day

Spreading awareness at Saint Mary's College and beyond

By Amanda Kuehn

The mission of the Women's Resource Center at Saint Mary's College is to be "a locus of women's empowerment, an inclusive space where every member of the SMC community, all genders, bodies, sexual orientations, racial, spiritual, and ethnic identities can seek education, support, dialogue and engagement around issues of gender equity, identity, and equality," according to documents carefully crafted by director Sharon Sobotta and coordinator Gillian Cutshaw. It may seem like a lot to bite off, but the WRC is up to the challenge.

An office within SMC's Student Life, the WRC is dedicated to addressing and educating the campus community about a wide variety of issues ranging from relationships to self-esteem, identity to dating violence. They also raise awareness on societal issues like racism, sexism, classism and oppression. Much of this education comes in the form of small and large-scale monthly and annual events, many of which are open to the public.

One such event is the World AIDS Day coffee house, which will be hosted in the WRC from 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 4. The coffee house has become an annual event for the WRC and is open to any and all who wish to share their stories and increase their awareness, especially those who have been directly or indirectly affected by HIV or AIDS.

World AIDS Day, which is globally observed on Dec. 1, was initiated by health ministers from around the world in 1988. The hope is that cases of AIDS might be reduced by increasing awareness and promoting education and prevention, as well as improving treatment. AIDS advocates also seek to combat prejudice and call upon governments to keep commitments to fighting the disease.

There are currently 33.3 million people living with HIV, according to UNAIDS estimates. Two and a half million of those people are children. It is estimated that some 1.8 million people knowingly die from AIDS annually, not to mention the cases that go undiagnosed. The majority of people infected with HIV and AIDS live in lower-and middle-income countries.

The WRC's World AIDS Day coffee house is held in what Sobatto describes as "an open, laid back atmosphere," where individuals come together to share stories and experiences through spoken word, storytelling, music and art. This year a woman from WORLD (Women Organized to Respond to Life-threatening Disease) in Oakland will share her first-hand experience of living with AIDS. At the end of the evening, participants will proceed to SMC's chapel lawn and tie red ribbons around trees as a sign of remembrance.

The WRC is located in Mitty Hall Ground Floor and is open Monday-Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (as well as during special events). For more information about World AIDS Day or other events, contact the WRC at (925) 631-4192 or visit www.stmarys-ca.edu/wrc.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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