

Published February 19th, 2020

Rotary Gala to benefit nonprofit; bring hope to child victims of sex trafficking

By Pippa Fisher



Guests at last year's Rotary gala enjoy the silent auction, before dinner. Photo Pippa Fisher

The Lafayette Rotary Club is gearing up for the Swing to Freedom Gala on March 7 - an elegant evening with money raised to benefit New Day for Children and their work with the young victims of sex trafficking.

The statistics don't paint a pretty picture. According to the United States Institute Against Human Trafficking, the U.S. is the number one consumer of commercial sex worldwide, and 83% of all sex trafficking victims in the country are American-born.

This area is no exception. New Day for Children has supported girls from Walnut Creek, Martinez, Pleasant Hill, Concord, Berkeley, Oakland, Antioch, Pittsburg, Richmond, Vallejo, Fairfield and San Francisco, in addition to girls from central and southern California and from across the country. Two-thirds of the girls supported by New Day are from California and, according to Executive Director Sharon Wood, the Bay Area is a major hub for trafficking.

Wood recalls how she first became involved with the organization when she became aware of a girl in her Danville Sunday school class, whom she had known since she was a baby, started to act out. "She was being trafficked right out of her bedroom, first by her father and then by another," says Wood.

To continue with the ugly statistics, the average victim of human trafficking is raped 6,000 times. The odds of escape are just one in 100. One out of four victims of modern slavery is a child, and Wood points out that the majority of the children are trafficked for sex rather than labor. She has seen girls as young as 3 being used.

"These are our kids," says Wood. "And the damage it does? It's not irreversible . but it is intense."

Wood says social media and extremely disturbing content available online are partly to blame for what she says is "one of the fastest-growing commercial industries in the country." She says the vast majority of victims are trafficked online, not by their families.

"The average age for a child's first porn experience is now 8 years old," says Wood. "What's available online is so much more disturbing than in the past. You can watch real rapes and kidnappings posted online," she says noting that often this content is targeted at the young.

New Day works with the FBI, law enforcement and child welfare agencies to locate and rescue girls victimized by commercial sexual exploitation.

Wood is happy to describe the safe housing, tuition, therapy, and equine therapy for which New Day provides financial assistance and scholarships, as well as medical and dental care. The main school they work with is in a remote area of northern California where, Woods says, they have goats and dogs. They partner with schools in Oregon and Colorado. She says the average stay is about 15 months.

It costs approximately \$45,000 per child to cover the expenses of long-term intervention for these girls, says Wood. And as she explains, the nonprofit relies 100% on donations.

Last year's Rotary Gala raised just under \$105,000 for New Day for Children. This year, says Club President Matt Pease, proceeds from the silent auction will raise money for scholarships and local community groups. The live auction and paddle-raise will benefit New Day and the parent company of Lafayette Social (N2 Publishing) will match their net profit with a dollar-for-dollar match to an international organization that helps in trafficking victims.

"A wonderful picture of philanthropy," says Wood. "The Rotary Club of Lafayette is making a tangible impact here at home, Contra Costa County, the greater Bay Area, California, the U.S. and around the world."

This year's gala will be at the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Center from 5:30 to 10 p.m. March 7 and includes a champagne welcome, hosted cocktail reception, an elegant sit-down dinner and music followed by a live auction.

Further information is available on <https://rotarylafayette.org/event-directory/>

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

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