



WEST CHESTER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Educating and inspiring students to achieve their personal best

Dr. James R. Scanlon, Superintendent of Schools

Contact: Jennifer Neill
Telephone: 484-266-1170
Email: jneill@wcasd.net
Website: www.wcasd.net

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 11, 2019

Rustin Graduates Spotlight Human Trafficking in Chester County

West Chester, PA - Human trafficking is not the type of crime that the residents of Chester County tend to focus their attention on. For most people, their knowledge of it is limited to Hollywood creations like the Liam Neeson film Taken. Or, they believe it only happens outside of the United States and that victims are foreign-born individuals with no money. But, delve a little deeper into this often hidden crime, and you will find that it exists in every state - and, not just in urban areas, but right here in idyllic Chester County.

For recent Rustin High School graduates Anna Hagenbuch and Lena Harnish, the mere thought that girls their age and even younger are forced into this modern form of slavery led them to action. Together, the two of them created the Walk Her Home Club this year at Rustin to raise awareness about human trafficking and funds to support survivors.

Hagenbuch first learned about human trafficking as part of an 11th grade English project. While researching the topic, she interviewed representatives from the Chester County Anti-Trafficking Coalition. It was through the coalition that Hagenbuch met Sue Ingram, the president of Walk Her Home, a Chester County-based non-profit dedicated to raising awareness of the factors that drive demand for trafficking and support the restoration of victim-survivors of sexual exploitation.

Ingram expressed to Hagenbuch that the organization needed volunteers to help with their first ever 5K walk. A percentage of the proceeds from the event would be given to organizations that work to end human trafficking and support survivors. That was all Hagenbuch needed to hear. She partnered with Harnish and they recruited other students to help with the event. The group quickly realized they could do more and they decided to form a Walk Her Home Club.

"We clearly had an interest here at Rustin," said Hagenbuch. "Students are really happy to help out our community. Mainly what Walk Her Home does is raise money for other organizations, so the part that we are affecting is the restoration of survivors."

"The most shocking thing I learned was that it is happening here," said Harnish. "When most people think about human trafficking, they think about other countries. There are 25 hubs in our county alone."

The club organized an outdoor movie night on May 25 at Rustin and raised about \$3,000 that was given to the National Trafficking Sheltered Alliance, one of the various organizations Walk Her Home partners with.

What does human trafficking look like?

Human trafficking is defined as using force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act. According to the Department of Homeland Security, it can happen in any community, and victims can be any age, race, gender, or nationality.

"I offer a quote from Alan Borowsky, assistant District Attorney from Delaware County," says Sue Ingram, president of Walk Her Home.

"A girl or boy living in a million dollar home is just as likely to be a trafficking victim as a child in the inner city."

How does one become a victim?

"We have all gone through those years of doubt, lack of confidence, questioning and needing affirmation," says Ingram. "That is what a trafficker does. A trafficker is not this stereotypical evil guy that you see depicted in the movies. It could be a 21-year-old young man who recognizes he could lure in a 12, 14, or 16-year-old girl by giving her a lot of attention, proclaim love and tell her that he understands her better than anyone else. He grooms her and builds her up until she is attached and bonded to him. Then he talks about financial concerns and worries, and all he needs her to do is this 'one thing.' If she really loves him, she would do it."

Ingram offers another scenario.

"A girl at school lures another girl to a party. At the party, she has a drug dropped into her drink, and she's filmed having sex with three or four guys. Then the trafficker tells her he is going to expose her on social media and she'll be ruined unless she does what he says. He offers her heroin to make it easier to get through the act."

"Human trafficking is literally the fastest growing criminal enterprise," says Ingram, president of Walk Her Home. "It is surpassing drugs in terms of sales and revenues. A trafficker can make \$100,000 - \$200,000 a year off of one girl."

"The issue is really becoming more mainstream, especially when we have high profile cases like Robert Kraft from the New England Patriots. It really is very telling and revealing about the type of men that are purchasing girls, boys, and women for sex. It goes across every single demographic area of this country. And, the girls are skewing younger and younger."

Ingram says she launched Walk Her Home with the purpose to raise funds to support safe houses across the country to restore the survivors of human trafficking.

How does restoration work?

"The first thing people need to know is that the average life span for someone being trafficked is seven years," says Ingram. "There is malnutrition, a lack of health care, physical abuse, emotional trauma, drug addiction. Twelve to 24 months is the length of a typical program. There are emotional therapies

and proper health care; we help to get them off drugs, give them job training and life skills. Then they move to semi-independent housing and get a job."

"The trouble is, prostituted women are often jailed, not the buyers. One woman was arrested 51 times before getting help. Their records need to be expunged in order for them to get a job. Imagine being forced to have sex 10-15 times a day from the time you were an adolescent, and you're now addicted to drugs. You have a prison record. You've never held down a job, and you have no education. Imagine how daunting that would be to overcome. So, we are now developing this national network of best practices. How do we best rehabilitate them?"

What can the average person do to help abolish this form of modern-day slavery?

"We need the public to be the boots on the ground," says Ingram. "It is not our job to determine if there is criminal activity going on, but it is our responsibility to report it if we see something suspicious. You cannot look away. If you choose to look away, you are potentially putting your children at risk."

Ingram is working with Hagenbuch and Harnish to help start Walk Her Home Clubs in high schools across the country.

"When Anna came to me, I had no clue in my mind that Walk Her Home would move into high schools. What she and Lena have started is the prototype for launching these clubs in high schools, not just in Chester County, but beyond these boundaries. It brings tears to my eyes watching kids care about this and sharing it with other kids. That's how we are going to work towards eradicating human trafficking."

Hagenbuch will attend Marist College in New York this fall, majoring in pre-medicine. She plans to start a Walk Her Home club at the college.

"Stop keeping your nose down," says Hagenbuch. "Look at people, look for the signs."

Harnish plans to obtain her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of Pittsburgh and wants to be a neonatal intensive care unit nurse. She too plans to start a Walk Her Home Club.

"Right here, right now, it is our concern," says Harnish. "It (human trafficking) runs rampant, but you don't see it."

Although Hagenbuch and Harnish have graduated from Rustin, both say Walk Her Home will continue next year under the leadership of senior Hope Geissler, and Harnish's sister, sophomore Susanna Harnish.

For more information on Walk Her Home, visit www.walkherhome.org. If you or someone you know, is a victim of human trafficking call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.

###