

NGO takes novel approach to war on domestic violence

Written by Michel Outridge

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-uses 'world's longest billboard' to help garner troops

THE Witness Project, employing art, yesterday morning placed posters along the seawall at Turkeyen, Greater Georgetown in an effort to sensitise the society about the upsurge in child abuse and violence against women. Education

Minister Priya Manickchand was on hand during the exercise to help place posters on the seawall. She later told the Guyana Chronicle that the project was conceived and managed by the Margaret Clemmons Foundation – named after a woman who visited and fell in love with Guyana, and wanted to spend a significant amount of her time improving the country by adding to the changes that have already been made.

Minister Manickchand pointed out that during the August holidays last year, Clemmons had a project running, wherein she furnished children from all walks of life with cameras, notebooks and other materials, had them photograph children and some adults ~~who were victims of child abuse and domestic violence~~, and worked with persons from her foundation and others from Sesame Street to focus on the eyes of the photographs they had captured on film.

NOTE: There was a misprint crossed out above - the photos of children and adults are people making a statement that violence must end - they are not victims of violence themselves.

The concept

Manickchand explained that the concept of the August 2011 exercise was to draw attention to the fact that children are witnesses to everything happening around them, and adults must therefore behave in a way that would best positively influence children. Adult men must therefore realise that if they are going to beat up their wives, the children



Youths show their concern about domestic violence (Photos by Cullen Bess-Nelson)

are watching, believing this to be normal behaviour.

Likewise, women must consider how the action of their cursing out their neighbours is going to influence their children. And drivers must consider the example they are setting for their children when they drink and drive, especially since that action might result in them being dead or killing someone in an accident.

The idea is that children are witnesses to everything adults do, and so adults must be conscious of that in their actions, so that they don't impart negative and harmful behaviours and messages to children.

Fifteen Guyanese children, selected for their leadership potential, were given simple cameras and sent out into their communities to take pictures of other children. They explained the project to adults and children, then asked their young models: "How do you look when you feel

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sacred?" Then they took a picture. "How do you look when you feel sad?" (Picture) "How do you look when you feel happy?" They also took photos of adults who supported their project. The amazing images the Witness children captured have garnered the attention and support of the newly-elected President of Guyana, government ministers, the U.S. Ambassador to Guyana, other international diplomats and hundreds of Guyanese supporters.

Endorsements

Minister Manickchand noted that Canadian High Commissioner to Guyana, Mr David Devine, had endorsed the project, as well as American Ambassador, Mr Brent Hardt and his wife; and that despite the inclement weather, others had also signed on to the project and were present at the location to assist in placing posters along the seawall.

She said this is the first phase of the project. Posters will be placed in the city and its environs to convey the message of the project, and posters are presently on the concrete fence of the US Embassy in Georgetown.

Human Services and Social Security Minister Jennifer Webster, who was also on hand to do her bit, said the Witness Project is also endorsed by her ministry, and that through partnerships with the U.S. embassy and the Canadian High Commission, diplomatic agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGO), the project was rolled out to highlight the incidence of children and women abuse in society, using art.

She observed that the eyes of children are used with the intention to focus on domestic violence and abuse of children in society, since a number of cases of sexual molestation of children were reported in the press recently, and it was an area of concern on which the ministry was working to sensitise the public, through partnership, in reducing the amount of occurrences.

Webster noted that there are many ways the project can make an impact on society, and this is just one such way -- using art to identify things in society to focus on issues of concern, such as child abuse and domestic violence against women, and the posters are placed where all can see.

Meanwhile, Founder of the Witness Project, Margaret Clemmons, told the Guyana Chronicle that the project engaged Guyanese children who are the most vulnerable and impressionable witnesses; and as a result, children have joined the project in support, and have lent their faces by way of photos which were developed into huge posters.

She said, "We don't want to see violence against our women and children, and we joined in this global action by French artist JR, and Guyana ended up being one of the largest global participants in the project, which is the only project that involves children photographers, and they did a good job."

People from every walk of life participated by allowing the children to photograph them, adding their faces to the hundreds of others enlarged as huge posters and installed on walls throughout Georgetown. Some of the posters focus on the eyes only, and these gigantic eyes of children will be looking out on the communities of Guyana for one month.

Definitions

Clemmons noted that the objective of the Inside-Out Witness project was to draw attention to, and through the arts spark conversation about the effects of violence on society's most vulnerable and impressionable witnesses: children. Through this project, children are sending a bold message to adults that violence against women and children must end.

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She noted that the posters add definition to the issues the project highlights. She disclosed that she was in Guyana on business sometime ago, became aware of violence against children, wanted to change things, and decided to incorporate art after working with Minister Manickchand and others.

She noted that it was a way for people to participate and see things differently, the way that children do. Using the art form depicted the picture in its true definition. The once invisible children now have a place by way of posters, which brings about awareness to their cause. With their message, they have touched the lives of over 1,200 people in this process. With their photographic images turned into huge posters and installed in the city, they will reach 239,525 people in Georgetown alone, and more through in-country and international presses. Witness Project is participating in the global art project, 'Inside Out' launched by TED prize winner, the French artist, JR, to use art to change the world.



Yesterday on the seawall, in the vicinity of Turkeyen, Education Minister, Ms. Priya Manick