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Marking our 31st year of publication

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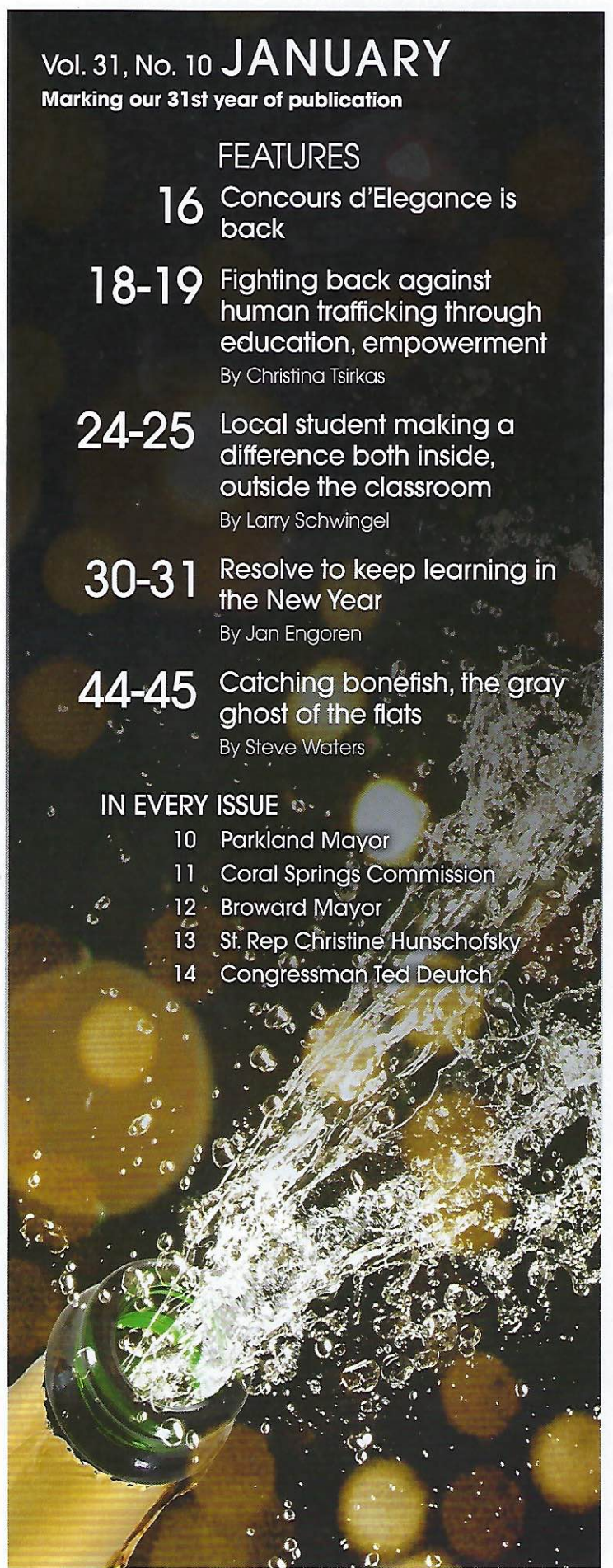
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Fighting back against human trafficking through education, empowerment



By Christina Tsirkas

This year, the Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival brought together KidSafe Foundation, a local South Florida organization dedicated to educating and empowering children to make them harder targets for trafficking and sexual abuse, and “The New Abolitionists,” a documentary that follows four nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Thailand and Cambodia fighting to end human sex trafficking. Together, this partnership is raising awareness about the growing problem of human trafficking in this country and abroad.

It was a crisp November evening when I sat down at the Savor Cinema in downtown Fort Lauderdale for a screening of “The New Abolitionists.” Originally built as a church in 1926, its theater still feels like a place of prayer, and that’s exactly what this harrowing film made me want to do, pray.

The film begins in Cambodia, where troves of girls are stationed at karaoke bars looking to pick up men. Many of these young women were victims of trafficking, some sold or deceived by their own families, and are now on their own and lack the education, skills, and self-worth to get out of the sex industry.

“A lot of people want to think human sex trafficking is prostitution. It’s not. Human trafficking is, by definition, when somebody has been forced, coerced, or frauded into these sexual acts,” explains Christina Zorich, director of the film.

In Thailand, a hotbed for sex tourism, the film estimates that there are 35,000 prostitutes in the city of Pattaya alone, where it is not uncommon to see adult men taking children on dates in public. As disturbing as it was to watch, it helps

to demonstrate both the pervasiveness of the problem and, even worse, the complicity of the government, which is why Zorich had to geo-block the film to prevent it from being seen in Southeast Asia.

“It’s pretty well agreed on in the anti-trafficking community that Asia is probably the most trafficked region of the globe,” says Zorich.

Just as jarring as the film itself were the number of empty seats in the theater, especially given that, according to data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline, Florida is one of the top three states in the country with the most human trafficking. “It’s happening here. It just looks different than it does over there,” explains Zorich. “It’s overt there; here it’s hidden. Because it’s hidden, there’s a lot of denial and lack of understanding.”

“Denial is one of the top hurdles we need to jump over,” agrees Cherie Benjoseph, cofounder and chief program officer at KidSafe. “Sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking all fall under the radar. In the movie, it’s horrifically blatant, but here it’s done in a way that you don’t see it. Child trafficking can happen out of a child’s home, and it happens in all types of communities. Right here in Florida, there are people more than willing to buy children for sex, and if we don’t accept that as a truth, we will never be able to see and/or prevent child trafficking and abuse.”

Thankfully, there are organizations here and abroad confronting the issue. And while the problem may present itself differently in both continents, the answer to combating the



issue is the same — empowerment through education.

In “The New Abolitionists,” the NGOs discreetly approach the women at bars, sometimes posing as sex tourists, offering them a chance at a different life. The girls who choose to go with the NGO are provided trauma counseling, education, skill development, and employment opportunities. Those who are able eventually build a new life outside the NGO. “I found it inspiring that these women could build beautiful lives after having gone through so much,” says Zorich.

While the NGOs in the film were helping victims who had been trafficked, here in Florida, KidSafe has been working to get ahead of the problem by teaching children personal safety, starting at age 4.

“We teach personal safety skills from a place of empowerment, not fear. We are not teaching kindergarten through fifth-grade students scary stories, we’re empowering them with protective skills, just like you empower kids with swimming skills to protect them from drowning. We empower them with skills of safety to protect them from unhealthy relationships,” explains Benjoseph.

“Ninety percent of the time, child sexual abuse and child trafficking are perpetrated by someone they know and have been groomed by,” emphasizes Benjoseph in discussing the importance of educating children from a young age, as well as adults. “We can’t prevent child sexual abuse if we’re not raising awareness about it.”

KidSafe has online programs for professionals working with

children and resource pages for parents that educate them on opening up the lines of communication with their children. “As parents, we assume that our kids know we’re available and they will come to us about anything. It is something we need to remind them about, early and often,” urges Benjoseph. “Making yourself an approachable parent plays a major role in keeping our children safe. The more we talk about relationships, and reinforce personal safety in our everyday parenting, the more we can prevent.”

In 2019, Florida became the first state to require child trafficking prevention education for grades K-12. To help meet this mandate, the foundation created “Stay KidSafe!” This is a program designed for counselors and teachers to use in their classrooms and includes a platform with 3D teaching animations, along with lesson guides that include questions, answers, activities, and role-play exercises. “Stay KidSafe!” teaches age-appropriate skills, including safety voice, circle of safe adults, safe touch/unsafe touch, good secrets/bad secrets, and accessing help. Students do not learn about human trafficking until sixth grade. After each lesson, a newsletter is sent home to parents advising them of what their children have learned and how to reinforce those skills at home.

The “Stay KidSafe!” program is free for all Florida schools, as well as schools across the country, and is funded through donations.

For more information about “The New Abolitionists,” visit thenewabolitionistsdoc.com. For information or to get involved with KidSafe, visit kidsafefoundation.org.