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Survivor Project teaches children about human rights

by Karen Pierce Gonzalez

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As a young girl in Tennessee, Phyllis Rosenfield of Santa Rosa was disturbed by the segregation that existed in her community between African Americans and whites.

Deeply affected by such public displays of prejudice as separate theater entrances and restaurants, the 54-year-old descendant of Holocaust survivors is executive director of The Survivor Project, a Santa Rosa nonprofit organization that promotes understanding and acceptance of human diversity through education, oral history and the arts.

“All human beings deserve to have freedom from fear,” said Rosenfield, who oversees the Project’s efforts to provide Bay Area schools with curriculums and speakers on the subject of human rights and genocide.

“These are people who share their own experiences of loss, or threatened loss of human and/or civil rights,” explained the former chairwoman of Sonoma County’s Commission on Human Rights.

The Survivor Project is planning an afternoon fundraiser on July 21 at the Michel-Schlumberger Winery in Healdsburg. Highlights will include a jazz ensemble performance and a live and silent auction with auctioneer (and Project board member) Greg Sarris, tribal chairman of the Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria (formerly Coast Miwok Indians).

The goal is to make the Project’s Essence of Acceptance program available to more schools. Working with teachers, Rosenfield and others provide training in how to teach human rights.

of Sonoma County Residents – Cambodia, Japanese and European Jews – who at one time had to leave their homes on short notice and were sent to unfamiliar places.

Immediately, Rosenfield, an artist and photographer as well as an education, and Lisa Slater, the oral history expert she worked with to create the show, saw the project had a much further reach. From the exhibition they developed the Essence of Acceptance program. They believed it could serve as a model, statewide and beyond.

The idea quickly caught hold, and the program has received support from sources such as the California Council for Humanities, the Sonoma County Foundation and the State Department of Education.

“With 9/11 and Columbine still fresh in our minds, we all need to do some serious thinking about who we are as people,” Rosenfield said.

The Survivor Project explores the loss – and lack – of rights for Mexican immigrants, American Indians, Palestinians, Israelis and people of differing sexual orientations.

The Project recently co-sponsored a Santa Rosa showing of the movie “Paragraph 175,” an oral history documentary about treatment of gay men during the Nazi era.

Rosenfield said the film “was difficult to watch. But these are very important

The almost 3-year-old nonprofit organization was originally a Sonoma State University-sponsored program. It grew out of a 1991 traveling show documenting the experiences

“This includes careful study of the 1948 United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and an examination of the bills of rights provided by a variety of countries,” Rosenfield said.

The training also includes instruction on oral-history projects and how to create interactive art projects for the students to express what they have learned. A recent art and poetry show by ninth-grade students of Santa Rosa’s Maria Carillo High School was on display at the Chop’s Teen Center, downtown Santa Rosa.

Dorothy Patch-Kennedy, one of the school’s social studies teachers, said the students enjoyed learning interactive interviewing skills and what it’s like to confront cultural barriers.

Morris Turner of Rohnert Park, author of “America’s Black Towns and Settlement” (Missing Page Productions), said that as a second and third-grader in Sacramento, he was the only African American in his classroom.

“The other students had no awareness of black people, and the teacher only had a famous sports star or musician as a reference,” he said. “Some days I felt like I couldn’t breathe.”

Turner’s family was denied a house because of their race, and he says he has lost and gained jobs based upon his skin color.

“I was offered an advertising position, and

stories for all of us to hear and remember.”

when I accepted, the person who hired me said, ‘ We’ve been trying to get a black person in this position for a long time.’”

Rosenfield recalled that, as a teacher in the Appalachians during the 1980s, there was talk in America about actually putting AIDS patients in camps.

For Gail Alioto, a school teacher with the Sonoma County’s Los Guilicos Youth Detention Center, issues of human and civil rights are always daily topics.

“The project’s curriculum is great, especially for the disenfranchised youth. Following the Essence of Acceptance manual, we look at current events and discuss which rights are being threatened.”

Her students are often with her short-term – a day, week or month – leaving little time to make an impression. But it can happen.

One afternoon, after Alioto’s students had interviewed a Holocaust survivor who had witnessed her father’s death and had suffered enormously herself, Alioto was approached by one student who commented on the Holocaust survivor’s fully engaged life.

“Despite what she had experienced, she was still choosing life,” Alioto said of the survivor.

And that’s what the student took from the afternoon.