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May 4, 2005

Filmmaker, local experts shed light on child abuse

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WINCHESTER -- Child abuse victims are not alone.

That message reverberated through Umpqua Community College's Jacoby Auditorium Saturday afternoon as local residents came together to learn more about the crime.

Los Angeles-based filmmaker Angela Shelton was the honored guest at the event presented by UCC's Cultural Enrichment Committee in conjunction with the local movement, the Child Abuse Prevention Partnership.

"This is a revolution, and all of you are warriors in the revolution," Shelton told a crowd of around 300 people following a screening of her documentary "Searching for Angela Shelton."

Although she set out to do a lighthearted survey of American women, in her film Shelton found herself on a journey of discovery about the epidemic proportions of child abuse and domestic violence in the United States.

In 2001, she set out to locate all the women named Angela Shelton in the country. More than half of the 40 women she contacted came from backgrounds of abuse.

"Making this film really made me realize that I was not alone," said Shelton, whose own history of incest frames the documentary.

Following the emotionally charged film, which drew bursts of laughter, gasps of disbelief and heavy sighs from the crowd, Shelton joined a panel of local abuse and law enforcement officials in their effort to shed light on the crime.

The panel took questions from the audience on issues such as the statute of limitations for child abuse and the psychology of predators.

Because many people who endured child abuse repress the trauma, it can be decades before a victim remembers the abuse and has the chance to confront their abuser.

Roseburg Police Lt. Pat Moore explained that the statute of limitations for abuse is generally based on when a victim remembers the incident.

"A clock still starts ticking, but not from the time (the incident) occurred," he said.

Douglas County sheriff's detective Angie Borigo encouraged victims to report abuse regardless of concerns over the statute of limitations. It's likely, she said, that the abuser could still be committing the crime.

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"There were probably other victims," she said.

Questions were also raised about whether perpetrators can be in such denial that they can falsely pass a polygraph test. In Shelton's film, she confronts her estranged father and past abuser only to hear him repeatedly deny his crimes against her.

Moore said abusers can convince themselves that they are innocent, but the chance of fooling a lie detector test is remote. The tests are important, though, because often no physical evidence exists from past crimes and polygraphs can help prosecutors gain insight into a case.

One audience member wanted to know why perpetrators commit abuse.

Douglas County Circuit Judge Joan Seitz said abuse is usually a cycle within families.

"Abusers breed abusers, wife beaters frequently breed wife beaters," she said, adding that education is an important tool to breaking those cycles.

After the event, Sutherlin resident Nan Bidlack said she felt the film screening was a "wonderful way to educate the community about this issue."

Having volunteered in the field of abuse prevention around 30 years ago, she was interested to learn that the problem has not died down.

"It's just as pressing an issue now as it was then," she said.

Douglas County sheriff's deputy Justin Barnes said he appreciated Shelton's thoughtful portrayal of abuse.

"It wasn't one-sided," he said. "She wasn't just going after men, she wasn't just going after law enforcement."

Barnes said, though, the film reminded of him of how much work still needs to be done in law enforcement.

"It was a real eye-opener," he said.

To learn more about the film, visit www.searchingforangelashelton.com.

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