Chicago program focuses on the reality of human trafficking

by Ivanka Bryan

CHICAGO - The Alla Horska branch of the Women’s Association for the Defense of the Four Freedoms for Ukraine (WADFPU), hosted a community awareness event about human trafficking on October 9, 2010. This event was held under the auspices of the Blue Heart Campaign of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), whose goal is to increase the understanding of, and to create urgency around the issue in order to motivate coordinated efforts to fight this horrendous crime, which affects more than 4 million men, women and children annually.

The audience ranged in age from university students to those in their golden years. Among the participants were clergy of the Chicago metropolitan area as well as representatives of various community organizations, including: Sister Luisa Tispa, director of the Catechetical Institute of the Ukrainian Catholic University and vice-chair of the Patriarchal Catechetical Commission; Andrei Filipchuk, vice-consul of the Consulate General of Ukraine in Chicago; Vera Eliazhevska, chair of the Chicago-Kyiv Sister Cities Committee; and David Pavlik, a candidate for Alderman from Chicago’s 32nd ward.

The evening’s program began with a clip from a public service film in the Ukrainian language that was produced with sponsorship from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), in cooperation with various Ukrainian anti-trafficking organizations and the International Organization for Migration. Many people are unaware of the trafficking epidemic and those who are informed don’t think that they could become victims themselves. The threat usually comes in the guise of an opportunity to work abroad, especially for students during school vacations. In a country racked with a high unemployment percentage, this is an attractive proposition. The film helps educate young people by creating awareness and outlining the specific requirements for working abroad so that they can ensure that offers they entertain are legitimate.

Orysia Sushko outlined the efforts of the Blue Heart campaign and what Chicago’s community organizations can do to combat this atrocious crime against humanity. Mrs. Sushko is a Ukrainian Canadian community activist, chair of the Anti-Trafficking Commission of the World Federation of Ukrainian Women’s Organizations (WFUWO), appointee to the prestigious Order of Canada, and immediate past-president of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

Rachel Durschlag, founder and executive director of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE), continued the discussion from a local perspective. Ms. Durschlag made the startling revelation that trafficked women pass through our very own neighborhoods and that we must reach out to advocacy groups like CAASE, an organization that works to eliminate sexual exploitation through litigation and advocacy, organizing and policy reform, and prevention and resource development, to help these victims.

Victor Malarek, a Ukrainian Canadian journalist and author of two internationally published books about the travesty of sexual enslavement of women, “The Nataschas” and “The Johns,” gave the closing remarks. Mr. Malarek travels the globe speaking out against the epidemic of modern-day slavery and chastises governments for their lack of action on the matter. He does not sugarcoat the human rights violations endured by trafficked persons.

After the program, the enthusiastic audience asked questions of the panel of speakers. Finally, a basket generously donated by The Body Shop was raffled off as a door prize. Representatives from The Body Shop were on hand throughout the evening to collect signatures for a petition that calls on governments throughout the world to give children greater protection against trafficking and to increase “safe harbor” laws.

Earlier in the day, WADFPU hosted a luncheon with Mrs. Sushko and Mr. Malarek to discuss what the Ukrainian community at large can do to combat human trafficking. Among those in attendance were Chrystya Weereszczuk, head of the national executive of WADFPU, and Olya Kolody, president of the Alla Horska WADFPU branch in Chicago.

The day’s events were a success in that they educated people on the issue of human trafficking and all of its forms – sexual exploitation, harvesting of human organs, involuntary servitude, illegal migrant work, mail order brides and mercenaries.

The Alla Horska branch is encouraging other WADFPU branches and Ukrainian National Women’s League of America (UNWLA) branches throughout the U.S. to take up this issue and inform the public of the crimes committed against women and to reach out to their local organizations to help stop the “traffic.” Adding a link to the Blue Heart campaign on organizational websites also helps raise awareness.

Readers can find more information about the Blue Heart Campaign by visiting the websites of the World Federation of Ukrainian Women’s Organizations (www.wfuwo.com/Projects-BlueHeart.html) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (www.unodc.org/blueheart/index.html).

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Ukraine’s Unity Day...

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Sophia Square.

“There’s a significant portion of opposition voters who don’t trust either Tymoshenko or Tihanyev,” Mr. Fesenko said. “That’s a potential electorate for Yatsenyuk. From his own political interests, he’s supposed to separate himself and act independently.”

For doing that, however, Mr. Yatsenyuk has drawn suspicion from other opposition leaders who say he’s cooperating with the Party of Regions to act as a controlled opposition. Those claims are baseless when considering Mr. Yatsenyuk’s sharp and vocal criticism of the 2011 budget, Mr. Fesenko said. “It’s incorrect to think there’s one opposition, and everyone else is against Tymoshenko and on the side of the government,” he said. “I don’t support monopolizing the status of opposition, or the notion that if Tymoshenko’s under attack, then she’s the only true opposition.”

Among the redeeming events of Unity Day was a human chain formed across the Paton Bridge in Kyiv to symbolically unite both sides of the Dnieper River, which are typically divided on geo-political issues. Hundreds of Ukrainians of all ages and backgrounds waved Ukrainian flags, painted their faces blue-and-yellow, sang folksongs and locked their arms across the bridge in unity and love for Ukraine.

No political parties were involved.