

Guadalupe Center's virtual 'Circetacular' raises over \$950,000

Special to the Immokalee Bulletin

NAPLES – Guadalupe Center's Circetacular, a circus-themed virtual fundraising extravaganza, raised more than \$950,000 to support the nonprofit's mission of breaking the cycle of poverty through education for the children of Immokalee.

Livestreamed on Jan. 21 under the virtual big top, Circetacular was filled with special effects, comedic performances, compelling videos, heartfelt testimonials and traditional circus acts, including juggling, augmented reality, circus animals and an all-time favorite – pies in the face of Guadalupe Center President Dawn Montecalvo after online donations surpassed fundraising goals.

Guadalupe Center's signature event is the nonprofit's largest annual fundraiser and traditionally kicks off Naples' winter season of philanthropic formal galas. In 2021, Circetacular instead was livestreamed to smart TVs, laptops, tablets and smartphones across Southwest Florida and beyond.

"All year, our rallying cry has been 'The show must go on,' which refers to both Circetacular and our education programs," Montecalvo said. "We have remained student focused and mission forward because, in our eyes, nothing can stop education as long as enough people passionately care about it. We are incredibly thankful for the unwavering support of our sponsors and donors who are helping rewrite the stars for students and families in Immokalee."

Circetacular's audience of philanthropists, business and community leaders, entrepreneurs and educators received patron party boxes filled with mementos, including a clown bowtie, animal crackers, locally-made custom cookies, popcorn and salsa, and Guadalupe Center accessories such as hats and face masks. The show's interactive program featured dozens of students who are benefiting from contributions made by generous Guadalupe Center supporters.

During the show, current and former students shared their personal stories

through "This Is Me," a new campaign that introduces the talented, inspiring students of Immokalee to Southwest Florida. One of those students was Marc Dorcin, whose family moved to the U.S. from Haiti after the devastating earthquake in 2010. He spoke no English at the time and was later assigned to remedial classes as a freshman at Immokalee High School. Now, after hard work under the tutelage of his mentors and staff at Guadalupe Center, Dorcin is enrolled in the rigorous Cambridge AICE program at school. Last year, his father passed away, and again Guadalupe Center stepped in to help, making sure he was still on track to graduate and pursue a college degree.

"Adversity is no longer my task-master; it will not control my future," Dorcin said. "Instead, my future is filled with possibilities, including a college education."

Circetacular's primary fundraising mechanism was the Jump Up for Education, a lively interactive drive that allowed attendees to make a donation and "jump up" to show their support for Guadalupe Center.

Donations large and small began pouring in, including a \$100,000 match challenge from an anonymous donor.

Proceeds from Circetacular will support Guadalupe Center's three educational programs: the nationally accredited Early Childhood Education Program, After-school Tutoring & Summer Enrichment Program and college-preparatory Tutor Corps Program.

Circetacular's Big Top Sponsor was the Mary & Patrick McClain Foundation. Additional sponsors included Gamble Family Vineyards, Moorings Park Grande Lake/London Bay Development Group, Northern Trust, Priority Marketing, The Indium Corporation & Macartney Family Foundation, Heatherwood Construction, Waterside Shops, Carter, Elite Jets, Ficarra Design Associates and Infinite Professional Center. Media sponsors were Gulfshore Life/WINK, Life in Naples, Naples Daily News/LocalIQ and WAVV 101.1-FM.

Guest Commentary: Teen Dating Violence is not new in Immokalee

By Linda Oberhaus, CEO

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children

IMMOKALEE - Five years after the murder-suicide that took their lives, the faces of Immokalee teens Coby Martinez Deleon, 18, and Natalia Trejo, 17, still look out from their Facebook pages, a testament to the tragic reality of teen dating violence. A final post on Coby's page still reads, "Nat was here :)"

Today in America, 1.5 million teens are experiencing some form of abuse at the hands of a dating partner. The goal of February's National Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month is to raise awareness, promote prevention and reduce those numbers.

If you believe teen dating violence does not affect you, think again. The economic impact of domestic violence in America is approximately \$8.3 billion per year in medical costs and lost wages. By investing in adolescent awareness and prevention programs, we will save thousands of lives and billions of dollars.

Many parents think they would know if their child was in a violent relationship, but statistics show that 81% were unaware that

their teen had been physically hurt by a dating partner and only 33% of teens suffering such abuse ever talked to anyone about what was happening to them.

Dating violence is any situation in which one partner purposefully causes emotional, physical or sexual harm to another. Unhealthy relationships can start early and last a lifetime. With technology at their fingertips 24 hours a day, teens are more vulnerable to dating violence than ever before.

Here at The Shelter, we believe prevention and education are key in addressing and reducing incidents of teen dating violence. Last year, thanks to a strong partnership with Collier County Public Schools, The Shelter's school-based programs reached more than 16,000 teens, helping them to recognize and avoid unhealthy dating relationships.

Because the abusing partner is most often male, The Shelter offers the Raising Gentlemen program, which encourages boys and young men to challenge macho stereotypes that equate masculinity with control and physical aggression. The curriculum focuses on empathy and understanding of others, social skills, increased

self-esteem, problem solving, sense of personal power and belonging, respect and tolerance and healthy lifestyle choices.

According to loveisrespect.org, statistics for female victims is much higher than their male counterparts, with as many as one in three girls suffering some form of teen dating violence.

Girls often fail to seek help because they feel responsible for solving problems in their relationships. They may see their boyfriend's jealousy, possessiveness and even physical abuse, as "romantic." Some girls may see abuse as "normal" because their friends and/or family members are also being abused.

Through its Expect Respect and Healthy Relationships programs, The Shelter helps girls recognize different types of abuse, the dynamics of dating violence, characteristics of unhealthy and healthy relationships and how to set boundaries in a relationship.

Signs to look for in an abuser include excessive jealousy, constant checking in, isolating the victim from friends and/or family, controlling behavior, name calling, explosive temper, refusal to take responsibility and blaming others for his/her actions.

Signs that a teen may be a victim of dating violence include physical injury (often hidden by clothing), skipping school, failing grades, changes in mood or personality, emotional outbursts, and isolation.

If you have noticed these signs or behavior changes in a teen, it is important to speak up and get help.

Coby and Natalia are dearly missed in their community. It is hard to say whether early intervention would have changed the terrible ending of their short lives, but their story can be a lesson to us all. You have the ability to save lives by recognizing the signs, reaching out, and reporting any activity that you feel may be abusive. If you or someone you know needs help, call The Shelter's 24-hour Crisis Line at 239-775-1101. More information on The Shelter and its services is available online at www.naplesshelter.org.

About the author:

Linda Oberhaus has served as CEO of The Shelter for Abused Women & Children since 2007. For more information on The Shelter and its life-saving services, go online to naplesshelter.org.



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