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Entertainment & Life

Film sees human trafficking through eyes of truck driver

By Terry Mikesell

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When she was dating a truck driver, Pearl Gluck would be on the road with him and see what took place in the parking lots of some truck stops.

Women would walk the lot, knock on cab doors and, sometimes, climb in.

And Gluck would think: “What would drive a woman or a man to make a choice to live like that?”

Eventually, Gluck, a filmmaker, wrote and directed “The Turn Out,” a fictional movie about a truck driver who tries to help a teenager escape being trafficked as a prostitute by her mother.

The movie will be screened for the first time Friday at the Canzani Center at the Columbus College of Art & Design as part of the three-day Columbus International Film & Video Festival.

>> **Video: 'The Turn Out' preview**

Preceding the movie will be the 25-minute short film "KNOW Human Trafficking," which centers on four survivors of trafficking and provides tips for identifying people in distress.

A panel discussion featuring filmmakers and activists will follow the screenings.

Some statistics on trafficking:

- From 2007 through 2017, the National Human Trafficking Hotline received reports of 22,191 sex-trafficking cases within the United States — including 8,520 last year alone.
- The International Labor Organization estimates that 4.5 million people worldwide are trapped in forced sexual exploitation.
- The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children estimates that, in 2016, one in six endangered runaways reported to the agency were probably sex-trafficking victims.

"The Turn Out" focuses on Crowbar, a grizzled truck driver played by Gluck's former boyfriend — James J. Gagne Jr., a 25-year veteran of trucking. Crowbar has his own problems; he's addicted to methamphetamines and is living in his truck and separated from his wife, who has obtained a restraining order after their daughter raided his drug stash and overdosed.

On the road, he isn't above finding comfort among prostitutes — until he meets teenage Nevaeh (Regina Westerviller), who is being trafficked into prostitution by her mother (Marlo Tinkham).

As Crowbar struggles to turn his life around, he decides to help Nevaeh.

"We think about the power of the bystander and how really they do make a difference," Gluck said. "That's why I wrote the film."

In 2014, Gluck was teaching at Ohio University in Athens and writing "The Turn Out" when she read about an addict in Athens County who paid for her drugs by forcing a 16-year-old girl living with her at the time to have sex with the drug dealer.

The sad story gave her movie a focal point: domestic trafficking.

“I try and focus on the survivors because that’s the work, really,” said Gluck, 45, now an assistant professor in the College of Communications at Penn State University in State College, Pennsylvania.

“I feel like this is about giving voice to survivors to tell their different stories, whether they’re being trafficked from own homes or by somebody that they know.”

The movie was filmed primarily in 2014 in the Athens County towns of Chauncey and Glouster and at a truck stop in Mineral Wells, West Virginia. Many of the actors were new to the profession — including Gagne.

“He agreed, shockingly, to be in the film, and that was a very generous move on his part,” Gluck said. “It’s hard to play a trucker being a trucker doing certain things that most truckers don’t actually do.

“It was a very powerful performance on his part.”

Gluck will attend the screening and participate in the panel discussion afterward, as will Hollie Brubaker, the director and co-producer of “KNOW Human Trafficking.”

Brubaker’s short film was created by her company, Thespi Media of Cleveland, for the Renee Jones Empowerment Center, which provides counseling and services for women trying to break free from prostitution.

The film follows four women being helped by the center.

“Sometimes they choose to get into a situation that wasn’t in their best interest, but a lot of times people are lied to and they fall victim to something that’s not in their control,” Brubaker said. “It snowballs, and they don’t know how to get out of the situation.

“For the women telling their stories, it was part of their healing journey — to be able to talk about it, to talk about their experiences, to find strength in what they’ve been through.”

Screening Saturday as part of the festival will be the 16-minute “Caught in Columbus,” a film by Matt Hermes detailing the work of CATCH Court, which assists female trafficking victims. The screening is part of a program of Ohio-made short documentaries set to begin at 5:30 p.m. at the Drexel Theatre.

Jeremy Henthorn, executive director of the film festival, said that the entries provided an opportunity for organizers to focus the event on human trafficking.

“Our submissions were narrowed down, and we realized that there was enough material there — so to not acknowledge that felt like we were doing a disservice,” Henthorn said. “We felt like ... maybe we can be part of the discussion.”

Henthorn, a veteran filmmaker, said that filmmakers are rebelling against stereotypical Hollywood portrayals of prostitutes.

“It’s clear that this is a form of slavery in a lot of ways,” he said. “People are taking a real look at that and a serious look at that, which is what it should have been the whole time.

“We’re finally catching up to the fact that it’s not to be romanticized and it’s not a joke.”

To report a case of human trafficking or to find help escaping, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or send a text to 233733.

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