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The Day



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Norwich Free Academy Students' Play Tackles Domestic Abuse Issues

By [Claire Bessette](#)

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Norwich — The slap echoed through the empty Slater Memorial Auditorium as an enraged Ruud Erie struck his wife, Nicole Cardoza, who sank to the floor in sobs.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she said, her disheveled hair covering her face.

Elaine Porter, director of Project Outreach at the Norwich Free Academy, looked up in alarm.

"You didn't really hit her did you?" she said to the students on stage rehearsing their play on domestic violence.

Cardoza explained how Erie really had struck her discreetly raised hand at the side of her face. Porter was visibly relieved, and impressed by the students' performance.

Realistic episodes of family violence fill the scenes in this 20-minute play written and directed by 11th grader Christian Scandariato, 16, of Norwich. He plans to tug at heartstrings and hush the audience to stunned silence when these students in the NFA leadership class present the variety show "Tainted Love: Break the Silence, Stop the Violence," at 7 p.m. Saturday in the Slater Auditorium on the NFA campus.

The event is a fund-raiser for the Women's Center of Southeastern Connecticut and kicks off the 11th annual "1,000 Men Against Domestic Violence" campaign. Tickets are \$7 for adults and \$5 for students.

Just in case the play strikes too real a chord with some spectators, family counselors will be on hand to talk, said women's center Executive Director Cathy Zeiner.

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal is expected to attend a 6:30 p.m. reception before the show to recruit men to sign a pledge against domestic violence. Each participant will be asked to donate \$10 to the women's center and sign the pledge. The list of signers will be published in newspapers on Mother's Day.

The variety show will feature songs, dance routines, poetry and guest speakers from the women's center, the Norwich Police Department and a male victim of domestic violence.

The speakers will be available for a panel discussion following the play.

Scandariato said he envisioned the play "off the top of my head" late one night after he volunteered to write it.

Porter had recruited Scandariato and about 15 other students for the new youth leadership class in the fall. The class is an experimental collaboration among Project Outreach, NFA's largest student volunteer organization, the Norwich Department of Youth and Family Services, and the Greater Norwich Community Leadership Team.

Students listened to a presentation from Michelle Bussolotti, community education coordinator at the women's center and were moved to action. They decided to host a fund-raiser for domestic violence response and prevention programs. They divided the work. Some would act, sing or dance on stage. Others would work as stage hands and others would run the publicity campaign.

Senior Alexandra Pitkin, 17, of Lisbon, designed the logo for the flier. It depicts a heart, torn apart with a jagged split down the center, but held together by a chain and lock. The heart is encased in a house with the key floating on the outside.

"Domestic violence is a love that is broken," she said, "but they are trying to keep it together, saying it's still love. But it really isn't."

The key, she said, is outside the house, because the only way to unlock the broken heart is to get out of the house.

On the floor in front of the stage during a practice session last week, seniors Jason Plotkin, 17, and Josh Davis, 18, both of Norwich, measured and cut purple ribbons, folded them and tacked a pin on the back of each one. The ribbons signify domestic violence awareness and sell for \$1 each. The students already sold 50 ribbons.

"We took on such a big project, and we're all working hard to make sure it works," said Kimberly Stilwell, 17, a senior from Brooklyn, project manager for the event.

Stilwell, Plotkin and Jeanette Granger, 17, a senior from Bozrah, spent one afternoon visiting businesses from Norwich to Plainfield collecting donations for a basket drawing to be held at Saturday's event. The students also had the task of recruiting 20 adult men at NFA to be the first to sign the 1,000 Men pledge.

The adult advisors in the youth leadership program marveled at how well the program has gone in its first year. Angelo Callas, family therapist for the city Youth and Family Services Department, said the idea for the class arose last spring and was solidified during the summer. Porter recruited the students from grades 10 to 12. They have met twice a week during study halls, but just started practicing their play and dance routines last week.

"We hope the people show up," Scandariato said. "We want to get the message out to as many people as possible."

Tickets are available at the NFA Project Outreach office, 425-5643 or Norwich Youth and Family Services, Union Square across from City Hall, 823-3782.