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NEWS

COME TOGETHER!

Highland Park residents gather to support community services

BY JEN SHEA
THE NORTH SHORE WEEKEND

A party at a liquor store typically means headaches for the neighbors. Highland Park's first annual "Gather for Good" celebration aims for the opposite — an evening of cooking demonstrations, food, drinks and a raffle to support community services that benefit Highland Park.

The Highland Park Community Foundation (HPCF) will host the event on Sept. 14 at Binny's Beverage Depot in Highland Park. WLIT 93.9 FM radio host Melissa Forman will emcee, and councilwoman Alyssa Knobel will receive the Jack Blane Community Service Award for her civic and charitable efforts.

"We understand and care deeply about the needs of our neighbors," HPCF Chairman Nancy Mills said. "The HPCF serves as a dependable resource to address the most pressing issues facing nonprofits that operate locally."

Local businesses participating in the event range from Nothing Bundt Cakes and Carol's Cookies to Ruth's Chris Steak House and Viaggio. Tickets are \$75.

"It's going to be a really fun, casual event," HPCF Executive Director Terri Olian said. "The whole community is invited. It's open to anybody."

The HPCF is an endowment fund that provides grants to local nonprofits. All recipients provide programs or services that improve the

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A PLACE TO HEAL *Cont. from PG 1*

Selah Freedom is a national organization with ties that are close to home. With a group residence for five girls in the Winnetka area and another one set to open near the Wisconsin border, the non-profit group has a mission to end sex trafficking and bring freedom to the exploited through four strong programs: Awareness, Prevention, Outreach and Residential.

Winnetka native Elizabeth Blendez Fisher, co-founder, president and CEO of Selah Freedom, says many of the victims served by the organization are runaways between the ages of 12 and 14.

"Within 48 hours of running away, 80 percent of little girls from any socio-economic background and any zip code in America are approached by a predator/trafficker who literally knows what to say to coerce them," she said. "They are typically given a drug and are sold 15 to 40 times a day for seven years. It's so sad and it's happening right in front of everybody."

In 2010, Fisher and fellow founders of Selah Freedom discovered that local children were being bought and sold for sex right here in our own communities. What began as the grassroots initiative of women from across the country to be a voice for the voiceless has quickly transformed into a thriving organization. Selah Freedom closely partners with law enforcement, legislators and influential leaders to not only shed light on the statistics, but to change the lives of these young victims.

For many of them, that means getting the chance to get off the streets and back to a normal, healthy life. In addition to providing a cozy, safe place to live, Selah Freedom created one of the first prostitution court diversion programs in the country to assist girls who are coming out with felonies.

"We want the girls to know that there's an opportunity for them and they do not have to go back to this lifestyle," said Fisher. "We've already served triple the number of young ladies at Cook County Jail than we thought possible."

A felony conviction for young women who find themselves in this situation often means they can't

continue their education or even get a job. By collaborating with the States Attorney, U.S. Attorney, FBI, and the Cook County Sheriff, Selah Freedom creates programs that helps them get their records expunged.

Fisher has other points of pride with what she has created at Selah Freedom — beacons of hope for young women who have endured unimaginable suffering.

For one, all the girls at Selah Freedom's group home in Winnetka are working on their education and will graduate with at least a GED, with about 75 percent staying on a career college path. For those who choose not to pursue college, Selah has career partnerships with Lou Malnati's Pizzeria, Peet's Coffee and Park Hyatt Chicago.

The outcomes are beyond inspiring.

As part of the research for this piece, we had the opportunity to correspond with a 19-year-old Selah Freedom client named Julie. Like many others, she grew up in a Midwest middle class family — hiding sexual abuse from a trusted person close to her before running away from home at age 13.

"What happened to me became my identity, as I felt trapped with no way out," she said. "I was used to being treated abusively and I didn't know any differently."

While on the streets, she became further victimized by men who preyed on her vulnerability, creating a series of events that landed with her being incarcerated, which is where Selah Freedom came to her aid — offering her a place in a safe home and the opportunity for a second chance of life.

"This was the first place I felt like a human being. The program looks and feels like a home. Selah helped me identify the root of my trauma and eliminate any shame associated with it," said Julie, explaining that she had been in and out of 15 rehabs, hospitals and residential homes before finding Selah Freedom. "The groups and activities helped me create new brain pathways. I grew up too fast and never really had the chance to get to know me."

Today, with the help of Selah Freedom volunteers and mentors she calls her "angels," Julie is currently working and going to school. Her future is brighter than ever, and she is grateful for all of those who have helped her find safety and solace.

One of those "angels," Judy Urso of Arlington Heights, said she enjoys being on the "front lines" of making a difference in women's lives. "I've been a mentor to the women just by offering hope, and I've learned so much from them," she added.

Amy Ellis of Wilmette has also personally mentored Julie and watched her transformation.

"I love watching the girls overcome their past and bloom into strong, caring women under Selah's counseling and support," she said. "We exercise, play games or just talk about life. Since I have a family of all boys, it's my weekly girl time, and I truly care about the girls that have entered the Chicago house."

COME TOGETHER *Cont. from PG 1*

community.

"We support organizations that lack sufficient funds," Olian said. "The range of organizations that we provide grants to runs the gamut. It's a very, very broad spectrum."

Last year, the HPCF spent about \$183,000 on

grants. They went to 37 recipients across Highland Park and Highwood.

The goal of "Gather for Good" is to raise awareness as well as funds. The event will feature \$50 gift boxes with a variety of prizes. Sponsorships start at \$1,000 and go up to \$100,000.

"We've never really had a major fundraiser," said Betsy Brint, one of the event co-chairs. "It's just a chance for members of the community to get

together, to celebrate the community."

Brint said the HPCF functions as a safety net for local nonprofits. They haven't had the resources to meet the growing needs for support recently.

Binny's offers a new demonstration kitchen where they'll hold the event. Attendees will be "dazzled" by the participating restaurants and the drinks selection, she said, but they'll also get to

see what the HPCF is all about with the presentation of the Jack Blane Community Service Award.

"It's so important to give where you live," Brint said. "It's so important to level the playing field for everybody in Highland Park."

For more information about "Gather for Good," visit hpcf.org.