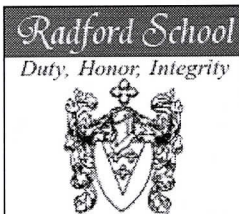
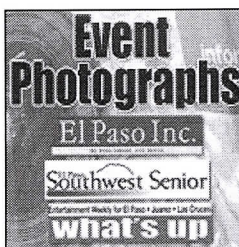


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'The Vagina Monologues': Much More than it Appears

By Cheri Pearson



Dr. Mukwege was horrified.

The woman before him was on the brink of death. She had been raped by six men and shot in the vagina, and now she needed 10 blood transfusions at his Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). She would never be the same – would live the rest of her life with tubes

running out of her for bodily functions.

He thought this was an isolated, barbaric action. But he was wrong. The numbers increased; he performed more than 24,000 genital reconstructions in 10 years. He went to the government for assistance but current leaders were once rebels responsible for atrocities and they didn't want to listen. He went to Europe to plead for awareness, to beg for help, and people turned away. He did not have enough resources to see more than 10 women a day.

It wasn't until 2007, when he met Eve Ensler – founder of V-Day, the international movement raising awareness of violence against women and girls – that he felt he found someone who would listen.

The magnitude of the problem led Ensler to highlight the DRC two years in a row. Locally, it is the spotlight country for "The Vagina Monologues," presented by the 2010 V-Day committee of UTEP and FMLA. Proceeds will benefit the Child Crisis Center in El Paso and the Congo's City of Joy, a refuge for rape victims.

The local Congo monologue will be performed by Lexi Martinez, an Andress High School Student.

"When I first read it, I was really touched," Martinez said. "It was a deep piece, but I did not know if I was going to be able to relate to it. I did a lot of research. It opened my mind to what is happening in the Congo and it makes me want to help them by sharing their story."

The local spotlight will join thousands of others, on a day mobilized by Ensler's initiative and her fateful meeting with Dr. Mukwege.

By 2007, Ensler had long been committed to ending violence against women and girls. In 1996, she had performed "The Vagina Monologues" on stage in New York City, giving voice to the personal experiences of more than 200 women she had interviewed. The script eventually blossomed into a global movement and is now performed annually more than 5,200 times in 1,400 places, raising awareness and millions of dollars to provide resources and safe houses. It has shattered the shame, stigma and cultural taboos of women all over the world, from the Japanese comfort women of WWII to circumcised women in Africa.

Ensler visited Dr. Mukwege in the Congo and was so devastated by atrocities against women that she didn't know how she was going to be able to report it so people could tolerate it. That country has been embroiled in an economic war claiming more than five million lives in the past 15 years. It is not about religion or ethnic differences, but greed for mineral resources like tin, tantalum, coltan, tungsten and gold. The Congo possesses 80 percent of the world's supply of coltan, which is eventually turned into capacitors for electronics.

Hailed the "Saudi Arabia of minerals," the Congo has many of the resources that we need to power our electronics such as cell phones, video games, and laptops, and the region pays a heavy price as armed groups move in and use rape as a strategic weapon. The village is gripped by fear, and they flee while their resources and

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women are plundered.

A U.S. bipartisan bill has been introduced that requires an audit and tracing system of these "conflict minerals," like the one imposed on "the blood diamonds" in order to curb the conflict. In the meantime, over a million people have been displaced and hundreds of thousands of women brutally and systematically raped.

Autumn Carter, a producer behind UTEP's production of "The Vagina Monologues," felt that working on this project and screening a documentary, "Turning Pain to Power," about the conflict in the Congo was especially important because UTEP was known as a mining college at its inception.

"I want to educate geologists and others so that they go out as informed global citizens who can make a difference," she said.

When her cell phone rings, it strikes home for Carter.

"I am obligated as a citizen of the United States and world to know where the tin or cobalt in my phone is coming from and if it is in an area where people are being exploited," she said.

According to Carter, although the Congo is the spotlight country, the monologues cover the gamut of life experience.

"It is cutting edge, raw, humorous, and sad. It will make you angry and take you through all the range of emotions. A lot of it is what women talk about and some of it is what we don't talk about, but should," Carter said.

V-Day is committed to ending rape, incest, battery, genital mutilation, and sexual slavery against women. Long directed toward female empowerment, V-Day is seeing the emergence of a new movement of responsibility called V-Men, which emphasizes how men can help stop violence. Carter would like to encourage local men to step forward.


"It is a huge opportunity for men to speak up and share their stories, she said. "Whatever information is collected will be reviewed by Eve Ensler for a V-Men play."

'Vagina Monologues'
 UTEP's Magoffin Auditorium
 Friday and Saturday, Feb. 19-20
 7 p.m. cocktail hour
 8 p.m. show starts
 For more visit vday.org,
raisehopeforcongo.org,
 or enoughproject.org.


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