

Remarks
Ambassador D. Brent Hardt
WITNESS Project Creative Writing Workshop
August 21, 2012
NCERD Training Room, Georgetown, Guyana

Ms. Margaret Clemons

Ms. Rosheni Takechandra

Ms. Alicia Christiani

Ms. Margaret Kurtzious

Boys and Girls:

I am very pleased to see all of you again. I really enjoyed working with you on the WITNESS Project earlier this year and would again like to congratulate you on your outstanding achievement in making the project so successful. I would also like to give a warm welcome the newest members who have joined the WITNESS Project: Welcome aboard! Finally, I would like to say how great it is to have Margaret Clemons back in Guyana and to thank you again for your continued commitment to the WITNESS Project and your creativity in looking for new ways to communicate the anti-domestic violence message.

Moving from the success of the city poster show, the eyes and the faces sparking discussions and raising awareness, you are now taking the Witness effort to new heights in facilitating a workshop for young people on creative writing, with a focus on gender-based and child-directed violence.

Creative writing is writing whose purpose is to express thoughts, feelings, and emotions, rather than to simply convey information. Creative writing skill is an essential tool to capture what people experience or witness, so they can tell their story. I understand that the goal of Margaret's new initiative is to empower all of you, to give you a voice, to help you to make better choices, and to deepen your own sense of self worth.

As we are all aware, the most powerful way to prevent domestic violence is to raise public awareness of the problem and its harmful effects on every member of the family. That is why the U.S. Embassy has been so keen to partner with Margaret and the WITNESS Project to help build awareness on domestic violence and send a strong message to

all adults in Guyana and around the world: that children are the most vulnerable and impressionable witnesses to violence and that violence against women and children must end. When average people are aware and decide that violence is simply unacceptable, and they intervene, then the rate of domestic violence will go down. That is our common goal.

Gender-based violence is a global issue that cuts across all divisions -- ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, and religion.

Violence against women and girls affects Guyana just as it does every other nation. One in three women around the world will experience some form of gender-based violence in her lifetime. In some countries, including in some regions in Guyana, that number is as high as 70 percent. According to the NGO Help and Shelter, domestic violence in Guyana affects one- to two-thirds of women; and domestic violence against children, against the disabled, and against the elderly is also widespread.

Let us also remember that both men and women are victims of domestic violence, whether it is physical, verbal, or emotional. This is

why gender-based violence cannot be treated as solely a women's issue, we must support the inclusion of men and boys in addressing and preventing violence and changing gender attitudes.

Studies suggest that up to 10 million children witness some form of domestic violence annually. Growing up in a violent home is a traumatic experience that can affect every aspect of a child's life, growth and development. In fact, boys and girls who have been exposed to family violence are almost twice as likely to suffer from nightmares and to exhibit aggressive behavior. The statistics are even more disturbing when we consider that cases of domestic violence often go unreported, and sadly many suffer in silence. That is why what you are doing here today is so important! Letting your voices be heard, relating what you saw, and expressing how you felt. Let the world know that violence has no place in a child's life. No child should have to endure the risk of physical and psychological trauma, which can have lasting effects.

The old and happily outdated adage that "children must be seen and not heard" has no place in an environment where domestic violence

is present. Children's voices need to be heard as they seek to find redress in situations where they witness someone being hurt and in which they too may be either physically injured or experience psychological pain. Family members and government authorities need to investigate the stories of these children, as they are at risk of physical and psychological trauma which can affect their entire lives. Children need to learn that domestic violence is wrong and that there are non-violent methods of resolving conflicts.

The voices of youth need to be heard by other young people as well as adults who are the mentors and models for young people. By sharing experiences you will help many other young people to realize that their experiences are not unique, that they are not alone, and that there are others who can help them begin the process of healing. We can create an environment in which the voices of youth are heard through the

- Organization of a youth forum so young people can speak out. A great example was the forum on domestic violence

organized by the US-based non-profit organization Caribbean American Domestic Violence Awareness (CADVA) last week in Georgetown, in which we were pleased to participate and support.

- Providing opportunities for people to examine their experiences of domestic violence and/or child abuse through creative expression e.g., poetry, art, drama, letter writing and music; or even
- Helping youths Conduct research on their broader youth experience.

Witnessing can mean SEEING actual incidents of physical/and or sexual abuse. It can mean HEARING threats or fighting noises from another room. It can also mean OBSERVING the aftermath of physical abuse such as blood, bruises, tears, torn clothing, and broken items. It can also mean being AWARE of the tension in the home such as the fearfulness of the victim when the abuser is present.

Overcoming the problem of domestic violence is a difficult, long-term challenge, but each and every one of us can and must help stop the cycle. This wonderful program offers an excellent starting point for you to be an even more effective advocate for ending domestic abuse.

Empowering young people is a global priority of the United States and I encourage all of you to make the most of this three-day training. Armed with all that you will learn in the coming days, and strengthened by the knowledge that you can make a difference in the world, I know that each of you will bring about real change by telling your story. I look forward to reading your articles in the newspapers. It is truly delightful to be able to see all of you and to work with all of your again. I have your photos in my office, so I see each of your faces every day.

Thank you.

[Presentation of cameras to new Witness members].