

'Half the Sky' reveals women's activism  
By Eli Bulno, Special the Eagle  
Updated: 02/03/2011 11:17:28 AM EST

Thursday February 3, 2011

GREAT BARRINGTON - "It bears witness to the sheer cruelty that mankind can do to mankind," actor/activist George Clooney said, describing the book "Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide" by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn.

This Sunday, from 2 to 4 p.m., Berkshire for Women Worldwide hosts a book discussion at Simon's Rock Lecture Center led by Dr. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, professor of gender studies.

Kristof and WuDunn have a very strong message in the book, Browdy de Hernandez said.

"Developing countries need to cultivate their women if they want to be financially successful and politically stable," she said. "I hope that people who actually haven't read the book will be inspired to read it."

Even a year after its publication the book has made a comfortable home on the New York Times' best seller list. Kristof and WuDunn are the first husband and wife team to earn a Pulitzer Prize in journalism for their joint coverage of China as New York Times correspondents. The award made WuDunn the first Asian-American to win a Pulitzer; she is a former executive at the New York Times.

Kristof also won a solo Pulitzer in 2006 for his New York Times columns addressing the genocides of Darfur. He maintains a public stance in a weekly Times column and has traveled the world uncovering its many atrocities with Clooney and others.

"[Kristof] writes a lot about international human rights issues. He's a wonderful champion of women in developing countries," Browdy de Hernandez said.

Along with her "Half the Sky" presentation, she plans on showing film clips and highlighting Kristof's columns. His Times series focuses on problems like sex trafficking, honor killings and sexual assault.

"He really takes a deeper look at these issues - more than most male journalists do," she said. "It's impressive."

As a board member for Berkshire Women for Women Worldwide, Browdy de Hernandez started a book club dealing with international women's issues.

"We're just trying to promote books that provide interesting windows into other countries," she said.

Sunday's talk is a continuation of that book club.

"We've always said you don't have to read the book to come," she said.

Described as a call-to-arms, "Half the Sky" not only illustrates the stories of women who pull themselves out of intolerable situations, but shows different ways the public can help to improve these situations. "It's not just passive consumption," Browdy de Hernandez said. "There is a moral side to the issues and then the pragmatic side. The writers end up talking about how ordinary people in the first world can get involved."

The most useful tool can be word of mouth. Leigh Strimbeck, co-founder of WAM Theatre in Valatie, N.Y., also plans to speak Sunday. Strimbeck first heard of "Half the Sky" after her partner in WAM, Kristen van Ginhoven, recommended it.

"She called and said 'we've got to do something,' " Strimbeck said.

The two act as co-artistic directors for the company which started in 2009.

For Strimbeck reading the grim stories in the book was nothing new.

"The book was on a continuum where I was already going for the things I'm committed to, equality and human rights issues," she said.

What the book dangled in front of her though, was a new idea, a new way of giving back. It got them both thinking about how they could be part of the bigger solution.

"Sometimes, people want to put their head into the sand and say, I can't handle that stuff," Strimbeck said. "I think we all can handle it in our own way. We can't all get up and travel, but we can do something. WAM Theatre is doing something that is positive. We can focus on our skills and create theatrical opportunities for women in theatre."

Sunday's discussion acts as a teaser, the opening act, Browdy de Hernandez said, for the main event, the 10th annual International Women's Day Conference coming March 5.

"We're trying to raise awareness, globally, about different themes - education, politics, women in arts and science, women writers of the world," Browdy de Hernandez said.

Browdy de Hernandez said one of the most effective solutions to global women's problems is education.

"Once a country has a better education system, it builds on that. Education is always the bedrock. Here in the Berkshires, we can support organizations to support girls getting to school in the developing world," she said. "It's the ripples that matter."

Certainly "Half the Sky" is one big boulder thrown in a lake of problems.