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Lights, Camera, Life Ties
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This is the story of Mary Inzana and the places she has created for hard-luck young people, collectively known as Mary Land.

These homes include TILT center in Trenton where Nate Costello can shed his gang-banger persona and focus on going to college. It's where David Ramirez can plan for vocational school instead of wandering the streets at night. It's a place where Drew Malkin can train to be a better father to his daughter. It's a place where Tyree Morrison can learn to write a job resume and learn to control his anger. The homes of Mary Land also include heal from abuse and neglect in a surrogate-family setting.

On Sept. 9, the public is invited to learn more about Mary Inzana, and her network of youth programs now in its 25th year, at the premiere of a documentary film: *Mary Land, the Story of Life Ties*, at the Triumph Brewing Co, 138 Nassau Street Princeton. Tickets to the event are \$25 and the proceeds will benefit Life Ties programs.

The 20-minute film is the work of Danielle DeRogatis-Gletow with Lisa Jackson Productions. The final cut was taken from about 22 hours of interviews with young people in the Life Ties programs.

When the project began about a year ago, DeRogatis-Gletow was concerned that filming youths describing their abuse, neglect, and gang activities was just another way of exploiting them.

Despite the sadness and violence in their lives, a message began to emerge, she said. "We heard them say over and over: "Without this program, I'd be dead. Or, I'd be in jail. Or, I wouldn't be involved in my son's life."

"I got a real sense of their resilience. They have so much determination," she said. DeRogatis-Gletow also has first hand knowledge of the abuse and neglect some children suffer. She became a foster parent in hopes of adopting a child and learned how the system sometimes fails its tiny charges, like the 2-year old foster son who came to her underweight, with weak language skills for his age, and burns on his body.

The film became of a labor of love that she worked on for about two hours each day before going to work as a marketing director for Films Media Group in Princeton. She shot all the footage after work.

The film has a budget of \$30000, but fundraising has not cover all the costs, yet, DeRogatis-Gletow said. Some to the participants agreed to take partial payment or go without, but some costs, such as equipment rental and promotional materials, must be paid.

"People have invoiced us and are waiting for payment," she said.

When DeRogatis-Gletow moved to the Trenton area about two years ago, she offered her expertise in film making and marketing to local organizations that help women and children. The response of Mary Inzana and Life Ties stood out among the rest, she said.

“Mary is one of the most relatable and inspiring people I’ve ever met. She’s just like someone who could be your best friend or your sister,” DeRogatis-Gletow said.

A 16-year-old girl now residing at Triad House described Inzana this way: “Mary is like my grandmother, who is down to earth, the Mama Bear of the house.”

Inzana, 62, grew up in Titusville and graduated from Hopewell Valley Central High School. In her third year as an accounting major at Rider College, she decided she really belonged at Hofstra University on Long Island, studying sociology. She did her practicum working with young offenders at the New York City correctional facility on Rikers Island working with young offenders. It was quite a culture shock after Titusville, but Inzana came to believe she could establish trust with even hard-core offenders.

She worked 17 years as a caseworker and supervisor with the state Division of Youth and Family Services. Then, in the early 1980’s, she founded the Mercer County Adolescent Coalition, which was later renamed Life Ties to prevent confusion with county-operated programs.

In 1984, the organization acquired the former Hill estate, 2205 Penning Road, Ewing and founded the group home Triad House, a group home where abused and neglected youths could get therapy in a surrogate-family setting, instead of being sent to treatment facilities as far as Pennsylvania, New York, and New Hampshire, where they would be treated in clinical settings, which interpreted as punishments.

Also under the Life Ties umbrella are Rainbow House, a residence for young women with HIV or AIDS, who are pregnant or raising children and the TILT in Trenton, which stands for Teenage Independent Living Training.

Inzana is hoping to create another residence as well, Mary’s Place, eight efficiency apartments to be built on the grounds of Triad House for residents who, at age 18, are too old for foster care, Triad House or Rainbow House, but still need a supportive living environment. The proposal was put before the Ewing zoning board, but withdrawn after neighbors objected. Inzana said the proposal is still pending, but has no date to go before the board for approval.

“Just because the kids are 18 they are not ready to be on their own. Some of the kids find it difficult to pay rent and bills and juggle all of those things. Most of our kids don’t really have anyone, particularly anyone who is stable enough, to help them.”

To qualify for an apartment at Mary’s Place, the residents would have to have graduated high school, and have a full-time job or working part-time and going to college. Occasionally, youths come to Triad House from the juvenile justice system, but more often they are victims, rather than offenders, she said.

“Many of our children have not been in any trouble at all,” she said.

While Inzana is chatting with Kim McNear, program director for Triad House, a couple of teenage women living there, poke their heads in the door. Their exchanges with Inzana and McNear are like mothers with daughters. One girl is showing off leopard-print heels and Inzana is worried she will fall and break

her neck. The other girl speaks of her dreams of a singing career, which Inzana encourages, but chides her as she refers to herself negatively.

At the TILT program in Trenton, Life Skills Coach John Morton has a parallel relationship with the young males who stop by to pick up job-readiness skills. Their interaction is a bit rougher. Morton has harsh words for one boy because he “cussed his grandmother.”

Inzana and Morton has succeeded in reaching the tough youngsters, who have gang activities and drug dealing in their pasts, with monthly “Rap Sessions,” where they make dinner together and listen to a speaker, generally someone who outgrew a life in trouble and living on the streets to become a successful in a profession or business.

As tough as these young men seemed at first, they all seemed quite vulnerable when they spoke of Morton’s impact on their lives.

Drew Malkin, 20, said Morton’s impact helped him get a job doing construction work so he can be a better father to his 18-month old daughter, Lailah. Morton brought him to Shiloh Baptist Church, where he is preparing to be baptized.

“He showed me what a real man is,” Malkin said.

For more information call (609) 771-1600 or visit lifeties.org.