

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



PHOTO BY MARK RABINOWITZ

Seven women take part in the documentary play "Seven" in 2019. The piece tells the stories of female leaders around the world who endured hardship and turned their experiences of adversity into advocacy. This year, it will be streamed online via Zoom on Sunday, March 7, in honor of International Women's Day.

'It's worth bleeding for': Play focuses on women's rights

By Brooke Becher
Correspondent

In the #MeToo world of today, Village resident Cece Sloan sees "a new era for women in America," but not for women elsewhere.

"Globally, women's rights are not recognized at all" outside of Europe, she says, "and that hasn't changed."

Since 2007, Sloan — a lifetime feminist and activist and an ambassador of the U.N. Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women — has hosted Laguna Woods' International Women's Day celebration, which this year falls on Monday, March 8.

In years past, the celebration brought keynote speakers to festivities in the Village. But this year,



Village resident Cece Sloan, a lifelong feminist and activist, has directed the documentary play "Seven" since 2007.

COURTESY OF CECE SLOAN

because of the pandemic, it has gone virtual.

The commemoration of global sisterhood will take place with an online reading of the internationally acclaimed documentary play "Seven" — socially distanced and accessible via Zoom at no cost — on Sunday, March 7.

"Seven" follows the stories of hardship endured by seven contemporary female revolutionaries and how they converted their experiences of adversity into advocacy, for the sake of women and girls as a whole.

In the piece, seven storytellers deliver these stories verbatim — they were orig-

inally performed by the real-life heroines in 2008 as part of the Vital Voices Global Partnership, a U.S.-based, international non-governmental agency that works with female leaders around the world.

Each story is native to a different country — Pakistan, Russia, Cambodia, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Northern Ireland — exhibiting different degrees of human rights breaches across a multitude of cultural interpretations and societal structures.

The transformative justice and unique healing techniques "to erase sadnesses and problems" of women across cultures are especially gripping for Sloan.

To Sloan, 88, the power

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of the words reads like new each year she has directed the play.

"It's the same for me all the time," she says. "I just feel for these women — what they've done for themselves, how they've come out of it — that is true empowerment."

Sloan will preface the performance Sunday with a spotlight on young women at the forefront of the reformist global narrative, such as Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai and National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman.

Sloan's contributions play

into the bigger picture, the intergenerational efforts of women worldwide to create the space for younger women to come forward.

The fact that now they actually are is an affirmative sign of progress.

But of course — as 2021 kicked off with Poland's near-total abortion ban and the rising numbers of, and ongoing marches protesting, femicide in countries like Argentina, Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico — the grind continues.

One of the "Seven" stories is that of Mukhtar Mai from Pakistan. It begins with her survival of a retributive, four-man gang rape. Opting out of the traditional route — committing suicide — Mai dedicated her life's work, still ongoing, to the advocacy and imple-

mentation of education, and she remains a champion for women's rights after she brought her rapists to justice. Laguna Woods Village resident Carol Shallin will be delivering Mai's story of perseverance.

Luci Hamilton, 59, of Los Angeles will be returning to her role as Anabella de Leon, a Guatemalan activist who overcame poverty and her country's violent conditions against women to legally combat corruption and hold office as a member of Congress since 1995, despite death threats.

Hamilton — who is likewise a lawyer and is working on cases involving Indigenous women, violence against women and child trafficking — sees herself in de Leon.

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The first of her family to leave Rio de Janeiro, first to make it to the United States — it's not lost on Hamilton that she could have never made it out.

"It's so common in our countries for the people around you to keep you down, hold you back, asking, 'Who the hell does she think she is?'" Hamilton says. "That's my story as well; she [de Leon] empowers me."

Another story, that of Ogun State Cabinet member Hafsat Abiola, begins with the assassination of her parents under Nigerian dictatorship.

Her president-elect father challenged Gen. Sani Abacha for office in the late 1990s, which cost him his life, and his wife's was taken after she demon-

strated in the streets for his prison release.

Abiola picked up the mantle: She became a human rights activist and a major player in Nigerian policy, founding the Kudirat Initiative for Democracy, which seeks to strengthen civil society and bury the roots of authoritarianism under which her parents were killed.

Victoria Burnett of Dana Point plays Abiola. In admiration of the African revolutionary's commitment to advocacy, Burnett — a daughter of civil rights activists and foot soldiers of Martin Luther King Jr. — fondly draws comparisons from her newfound Nigerian lineage and exhaustive journey of fighting for the space to exist, just as everyone else does.

"If you're a woman, [advocacy] bleeds over into every part of your life," she says. "I'm so tired on so many levels, but I know it's important

— it's worth bleeding for."

Burnett, who teaches storytelling to graduate students, reflects further on real-time stories that have unfolded around her — especially during her time abroad listening to stories from African citizens post-apartheid — and their pronounced, lasting impact.

"When I look at these women, at my parents, at the people I know personally, these people have given their life," she says. "What more can you give?"

International Women's Day performance of 'Seven'

When: Sunday, March 7; streaming begins at 12:45 p.m.

Where: Online via Zoom; email Cece Sloan at sloanccca33@gmail.com for the link to join.

Cost: Free

More info: Contact Sloan at 949-683-1278.