

ANNAPOLIS

‘Harriet’ screening educates, unites eight Annapolis communities

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After a screening of the movie *Harriet*, an event at the Pip Moyer Center with dinner, prizes and a group discussion of the film sought to unite eight communities in Annapolis. Here Will Rowel from the mayor's office discusses the film with kids, asking them questions about what parts of the movie sparked anger or joy. (Rachael Pacella / Capital Gazette)

One of Maryland's most important historic figures came to theaters everywhere last week — Harriet Tubman, the woman called Moses who ferried enslaved people to freedom in the North on the Underground Railroad.

The movie “*Harriet*” follows the Dorchester County-born Tubman as she escapes slavery herself and returns to the South to liberate others, again and again.

Toni Strong Pratt and her husband William Pratt, community activists who live in Annapolis, saw the film as a chance to educate and unite. Saturday the couple organized a free screening at the Bow Tie Cinemas Harbour 9. The group had two theaters and more than 200 children and parents signed up from eight communities: Robinwood, Bay Ridge Gardens, Newtown 20, Woodside Gardens, Eastport Terrace, Harbour House, Clay Street and Bywater.

Toni Strong Pratt spoke to the students as they gathered for dinner after the screening. She said if there is one thing she wants the kids to take away, it is that they can do anything.

“I believe we have our next president in here,” she said.

They also made loving one another a focus of the event, asking the kids to say and show, through lots and lots of hugs, how much they care.

At a post-screening and post-dinner at the Pip Moyer Recreation Center, the kids broke into groups and discussed the film with an adult. Will Rowel, a senior advisor to Mayor Gavin Buckley, led one of the discussions, asking questions of the kids, who ranged from elementary to high school age.

“We are all, for the most part, ancestors or offspring of people who could have been enslaved,” Rowel said.

Rowel asked the students to name a part of the movie that made them mad. One said a scene where the patriarch of the plantation where Tubman was enslaved told her she would never be free and her children would never be free. The scene, of course, mimics what happened in real life — a previous owner stipulated in her will that Tubman’s mother Rit and her children would be freed at 45.

But the legal document didn’t matter to the plantation owner, Tubman wasn’t freed and instead had to escape.

And then to flip that on its head, Rowel asked: What about the movie made you glad?

“At the end when all of the slaves are freed,” one kid said.

The scene referenced was a portrayal of the Combahee River Raid, in which Tubman lead 150 black Union soldiers. As a result of the raid, 750 people were freed. Tubman was at the front of the boat giving orders in the movie.

Some kids said the movie showed them to follow their dreams, as Tubman did, literally. She was hit in the head by a weight at age 13 and had seizures for the rest of her life. She said God communicated with her.

Troy Stansbury and Mike Hinton also led discussions with the kids, saying they saw bravery in Tubman, who overcame her fears, and they saw that women can lead. They also recognized that Tubman relied heavily on her faith in God to lead her through her journey, the men said.

The day will hopefully be one the kids never forget.

“It meant everything to me to bring the community together,” Strong Pratt said. “There’s been bickering, and we wanted to show that we can come together for a cause; freedom, education and understanding who we are.”