

Local documentary 'Up River' focuses on area Think Tank



Anna Jeffries, Reporter

6:43 p.m. EDT October 14, 2015



(Photo: Submitted)

NEWARK — The kitchen roof of her former apartment had fallen in and piles of debris were everywhere, but Billie Bibow invited Doug Swift in with his camera.

Although she now lives in a safer house and has found a job, she wanted people to understand the struggles of people in poverty, especially those trying to find work after being incarcerated.

"I wanted to show people that you can come back from having nothing," she said. "I want to change the world for the better so others don't have to go through what I went through."

Bibow was one of three returning citizens who shared their stories in a new locally produced documentary, "Up River."

Focused on the first year of the Newark Think Tank on Poverty, the film will be screened at 2:30 and 3:45 p.m. Sunday at the main branch of the Licking County Library.

"Sometimes organizations get started and their first year is lost," said Lesha Farias, a facilitator of the Think Tank. "We wanted to share our journey because we believe every community can do what we are doing."

Founded in June 2014, the Think Tank was established to empower people in poverty and make change on a systematic level, Farias said.

"We are not a charity that is helping one person at a time," she said. "We are finding out where decisions are being made and getting involved so people's voices can be heard."

The group focuses on eliminating barriers for people who are returning from jail or prison. But it also is working to improve access to food, safe housing, and mental health and addiction services.

After receiving a grant from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Think Tank reached out to Swift, an English instructor at Ohio University-Zanesville, to create a documentary about its first year.

A member of United Church of Granville, Swift is involved in its social justice mission and makes social justice films under the production company Wild Iris Video.

The more he learned about the Think Tank and the people involved, the more he wanted to tell their stories.

"The part that intrigued me was this idea of moving beyond charity to empower people in poverty to become active in their own advocacy," he said.

Swift spent about a year and a half working on the film. He attended Think Tank meetings and interviewed members, including Bibow, Eric Lee and Tina Blay, in their homes.

He also spoke with local leaders and shot footage in Newark's east and south ends.

One of the biggest moments he captured was the Think Tank's successful effort to raise awareness about the Ban the Box movement, which advocates for the removal of questions about criminal records from the application for public sector jobs. Applicants still go through a background check after the interview process.

Think Tank members traveled to the statehouse to advocate for the Ohio Fair Hiring Act, which would eliminate those questions from many public sector applications. They also spoke to Newark City Council members, who voted unanimously to remove the box from Newark's city job applications this summer.

"That sends a message that together we can really make a difference," Lee said. "One day, a returning citizen is going to get one of those living wage jobs in the city and it's possible now because of what we did."

Swift said it was an honor to spend a year with Think Tank members, and he's excited for Newark residents to see the film.

"A whole community is healthier when there is social justice," he said. "If people are in poverty, that effects the community at large and this film points the way toward healing the community."

It was emotional for Blay and her three children to share their story with Swift. But Blay said she is grateful for the opportunity to talk about the struggles she's faced since she was released from prison.

She's hoping it will inspire more people to get involved in the Think Tank and advocate for change.

"Other people watching it might see a part of themselves in the documentary," she said. "They might want to get more involved and see what they can do."

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Doug Swift films members of the Newark Think Tank on Poverty at The Sparta for the documentary, "Up River." (Photo: Zachary Dobbelaer)

If You Go

What: Screenings of "Up River"

When: 2:30 and 3:45 p.m. Sunday

Where: Main branch of the Licking County Library, 101 W. Main St

FYI: Free and open to the public. Anyone interested in joining the Newark Think Tank on Poverty can attend an informational meeting from 1 to 3 p.m. Oct. 25 at the library.

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