

Calgary Herald

Calgary women discuss taboo topic

Wednesday, August 29, 2007

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Section: Real Life

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Column: Sexual Health

Source: Calgary Herald

Illustrations: Photo: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald / Laura Wershler, executive director of Sexual Health Access Alberta, left, and Lana Leitch discussed menstruation at the recent Scarlet Summer.

All women have it, and yet few discuss it: menstruation.

But on a recent August night, about 30 women gathered in a downtown Calgary meeting room to discuss their periods and a whole slew of issues surrounding that time of the month.

As someone who'd never given my monthly cycle much thought, I found the event, entitled Scarlet Summer, eye-opening.

And that was the goal.

Laura Wershler, executive director of Sexual Health Access Alberta, says she wanted to give women of all ages a platform to explore some complex issues, such as what period-suppressing birth control pills like Seasonale mean to menstruation.

"The goal of the evening was really to give women a place to think, talk, discuss and laugh about the menstruation cycle, pay it a little attention in an age where there's so much encouragement to just make it go away," says Wershler in a phone interview after the event.

"It went really well. I thought the energy and buzz in the room was quite amazing."

It's true -- the event drew about 30 intelligent and articulate women of all ages.

Melinda Topilko, a 39-year-old student at the Alberta College of Art & Design, came for a couple of reasons.

"One is for myself because I just think that it's really interesting that as a woman who menstruates every month, I don't really think about it other than that," she says.

"And also because the school that I go to, ACAD, has more women than men and this is really something that is part of our identity as women. And as artists, we do a lot of stuff that examines identity and the body, so it seems like a really good fit."

Nikki Dueck, a 28-year-old sexual health public educator, came to promote education around menstruation. She brought Hillary Burt, a 14-year-old student, along to learn as well.

Farah Jivraj, a 25-year-old medical student and past board member of SHAA, came to not only share her thoughts, but also to hear different perspectives on

how women view menstruation and birth control.

"Menstruation is such an important part of most women's lives that it does need to be talked about and it's often very hush-hush," she says.

Hush-hush was not the case at Scarlet Summer.

After watching a film called *Period: The End of Menstruation?*, the women discussed topics such as whether girls are given enough information about potential risks with various birth control options, what menstruation means to women of all backgrounds and situations, and what influence corporations yield in setting the birth control standard.

Arts and crafts followed the discussion, with women constructing collages and mini-sculptures.

Andrea Campbell, 25, attended the event with her mother. Campbell crafted an intriguing piece to depict the multiple emotions she feels around menstruation.

She came to the event with a goal in mind.

"I hope that sharing this evening with my mother will help me to understand her point of view, and her relief to be done with menstruation, but also about how to simultaneously celebrate mine," she wrote in a post-event evaluation.

At Scarlet Summer there certainly was celebration and, perhaps more importantly, consideration.

Wershler says SHAA will likely run a similar event in the winter. If you're interested and would like to know more, contact the organization by e-mailing info@sexualhealthaccess.org.

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