

CLUB'S LATEST INITIATIVE WILL SEE THEM RAISING AWARENESS OF TRAFFICKING

Activist group is our 'best kept secret'

By EMMA PALMER
emma.palmer@nqe.com

THE usual response when someone is met with this word 'Soroptimist' is, "er what?". But although it might not have the same instantly recognisable ring as other women's groups, the Southend Soroptimists are determined ladies indeed.

The Southend Soroptimist Club has been around for more than 60 years but it's often labelled as a "best kept secret" – in fact Princess Anne once referred to them this way. Founded in 1953 the branch is the local arm of an international organisation compiled of lively and friendly women with a strong sense of purpose.

These are women who don't just talk the talk but get things done. The Southend group currently has 30 members who meet monthly at Garon Park in Eastern Avenue. The women have raised thousands for charities and support a vast array of causes, including local women's refuges.

They have also actively campaigned across south Essex and beyond about domestic violence and campaigned for equality and educational rights for some of the most poverty-stricken girls across the globe.

This weekend the members will take to the streets themselves to highlight and educate the public about the scourge of human trafficking. Supported by the UN backed campaign group Stop the Traffik, they will set up a walk-in piece of public art in the shape of an 11ft by 7ft giant gift box in Southend town centre.

"The box symbolises the way in which traffickers entice their victims with false promises," explained Margaret Sandercock, past president and long term member of the group.

The outside of the box offers the 'gift' of a brighter new life. Colourful and beguiling, people can't help but be intrigued. Once inside they realise the deception. They are confronted with a three dimensional, thought-provoking and interactive experience, which introduces the grim reality that victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation are forced

The box symbolises the way in which traffickers entice their victims with false promises that never materialise



■ Active member – Margaret Sandercock has helped organise the Gift Box which will appear in Southend this weekend

into. Visitors can then discover stories in the boxes are all based on cases that have taken place in the UK.

Former school head-teacher Margaret, 70, of Canvey, added: "Basically the Gift Box is attractive on the outside but the inside shows the reality of the 'gift'."

The three day event is being held in Southend High Street outside Dorothy Perkins. People can go inside the box from 10am until 4pm on Friday and Saturday and from 11am until 4pm on the Sunday.

Official UN statistics show that people trafficking is the fastest growing means by which people are enslaved. It is estimated 800,000 men, women and children are trafficked each year – 80 per cent of these are women and girls.

"This is an issue that as a group we feel incredibly strongly about," added Margaret. "As a club we are involved with the Southend Safeguarding committee and have been alerted to the possibility of women and girls being trafficked through the airport."

"We feel very strongly that any trafficked women are being conned to step into a new life with

promises that never materialise."

The Gift Boxes first appeared at the 2012 London Olympics and have since been set up in a number of countries. The first Soroptimist club was founded in Oakland, California, in 1921 and today there are more than 3,000 clubs across the world in more than 120 countries.

As for the name, which has its roots in Latin and means "best for our sisters" well it's not one that people instantly remember, added Margaret. "We get people getting us mixed up with chiropodists and optometrists, asking 'is that something to do with feet or eyes?'"

The group's membership status is currently at 30 but they are always looking to recruit new members.

"We have women aged from 30 to 70 and older and we have fostered links with students at Seevic College who have created a membership film for us and came along to our meetings and enjoyed them," added Margaret.

If you are interested in learning more about Soroptimists International or would like to become a member, contact southendsoroptimists@blueyonder.co.uk



■ Gift Box – the art piece has appeared all around the country and will be in Southend from Friday