PLAYBOY FOUNDER HONORED

Hugh Hefner gets a heartfelt thanks from Van Nuys nonprofit

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Posted: 11/18/2010 06:47:39 PM PST
Updated: 11/19/2010 02:19:44 AM PST

Hugh Hefner's legacy is as much about his lavish parties and myriad love affairs with beautiful women, as it is about his work as head of the iconic Playboy Industries.

But on Thursday, the octogenarian was honored for an entirely different legacy, one created over more than three decades as a major donor to the Children of the Night Foundation. The Van Nuys-based nonprofit is the only organization in the country dedicated to rescuing American children from street prostitution.

"Thank you for taking a chance when no one else would," said Lois Lee, Children of the Night founder and president, who gave Hefner the organization's first founder's "Hero of the Heart Award."

"Thank you Hef...," Lee said in front of a crowd of more than 100 cheering volunteers. "You have been a saint to countless American children who had nowhere else to turn to for help."

Founded in 1979 by Lee, then a college student, Children of the Night received its very first grant from the Playboy Foundation.

It was also in Hefner's infamous Playboy mansion that the impassioned Lee hosted her first ever fund-raiser for Children of the Night. At the time, she was running her organization out of her two-bedroom apartment, using it as a refuge for young women she found on the streets.

Asked why he decided to help the organization back then, Hefner said, "Because everyone else was looking the other way."

"I felt something needed to be done... and..."
that was what the Playboy Foundation was all about - taking care of social issues that were being ignored."

Over the years, Hefner has remained a faithful donor, Lee said, even when she was being threatened or heckled for tackling such a sensitive issue that she said many refuse to believe exists.

Dozens of young women, and men, who receive shelter, food, education and counseling services from Children of the Night today expressed their gratitude to Hefner by presenting poems, letters and raps.

"Here I have found the greatest gift... love and a family," one 16-year-old read from a letter.

"At first when I walked through these double doors I was scared," another 16-year-old rapped.

"But you've changed my life forever."

Now a grandmother, Darshanna Ramirez said she was just a young teen when she was rescued by staff from Children of the Night.

A childhood marred with physical abuse led Ramirez to a life on the streets.

"When I got here I kept waiting for the catch.... but the catch never came," Ramirez said.

"No one judged me here... I got peace at a very dark time...thank you for giving me a chance to succeed."

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