

Turturro Brings Awareness To Mentally Ill at Film Fest

By Cheye Roberson
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The actor John Turturro, perhaps best known for his performances in "Quiz Show," "O Brother, Where Art Thou?," and "Barton Fink," graced the stage of Greenwich Country Day School on Saturday not to give a performance, but to shed light on an organization that helps rebuild the lives of those suffering from mental illness and to discuss film and social segregation.

The Greenwich International Film Festival's spotlight on Turturro began with a short film showing some of the people who have benefited from working with Community Access, whose slogan is "Building homes, hopes, and futures." Community Access, based in New York City, provides housing, care, and training to the mentally ill in order to promote independent living.

"For over 40 years, Community Access has strived to assist the mentally ill homeless in New York City not only by providing housing and support services but empowering individuals to lead

healthy, productive and independent lives," said Elise Chowdhry, a board member and treasurer of Community Access.

As the legal guardian of his older brother, who suffers from mental illness, Turturro is honored to help bring awareness to Community Access and its programs.

"I think it's a great organization, and it's so nice to support them and what they do. They really have a big influence, not just in their work with the mentally ill, but also in alcoholism," said Turturro. "It's nice to put energy into something worthy."

Community Access also strives to help break the cycle of institutionalization and incarceration that has deterred the progress of many people who have a history of mental illness.

"One of the largest facilities that houses people who are mentally ill is Riker's Island. It's a very unlikely shot that they will get the services that they need to recover," said Dan Wurtzel, a fellow Community Access board member.

Wurtzel was very happy to have Turturro bring attention to the organization.

"I think it's absolutely amazing that he

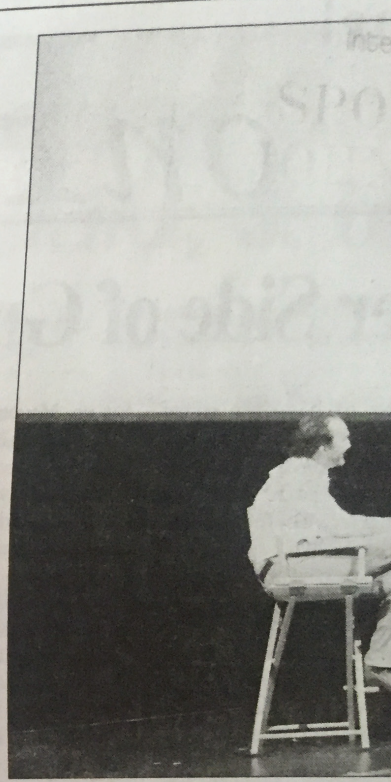
has embraced Community Access and is bringing a voice to a much larger audience about a very large problem that affects so many people," said Wurtzel. "Community Access is really about giving life back to the mentally ill."

According to Turturro, many people suffering from mental illness are shamed by society; living independently is one way that they can reclaim dignity and self-esteem.

"If you can have independent living it's a big deal—to not be shunned," said Turturro. "No matter what your background is, you may be ostracized."

The event was moderated by David Negrin, a screenwriter and film professor at Hofstra University.

Turturro, whose father is an immigrant from Italy, shared details about his colorful background as a child. He grew up in an all-black neighborhood before moving to an all-white neighborhood where he became the "darkest person in the neighborhood." Turturro feels that his background and life experiences helped him bring an authenticity to his roles in films like "Do the Right Thing" and "Clockers," both directed by Spike Lee.



John Turturro, right, chats with David Negrin at the Greenwich International Film Festival. (Cheye Roberson photo)

Turturro attended private school during his high school years and went on to study at Yale University.

He said that while living in New Haven, he again saw that social segregation was very present.

"I didn't know New Haven was such a complex place in the 80's. It was rough