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Building bridges, changing hearts in this race to freedom

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TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

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Among the audience mesmerized by a movie about a slave couple's flight to freedom were several men who until last week had been behind bars.

The screening was part of "Beyond Dialogue," which seeks to use film as a catalyst for racial reconciliation. It was sponsored with support from Capital One by Boaz & Ruth, a nonprofit program that builds bridges between Richmond's wealthy and those in need.

On Tuesday, a teacher, a minister, a dentist and several government employees joined former inmates seeking to turn their lives around through Boaz & Ruth's re-entry programs. Eighteen folks dined on meatloaf, rice, steamed broccoli and garlic toast as they watched "Race to Freedom -- the Story of the Underground Railroad" at Boaz & Ruth's furniture thrift store and training center in Highland Park.

When the film ended and the lights came on, the group reflected.

"I understood the fear of the slaves to even attempt to go to freedom," said Stephen Jenkins, who was incarcerated in Pennsylvania for drug-related offenses until last week.

Jenkins, whose mother lives in Richmond, appreciated the white people who helped the slaves reach Canada. "And they still exist," he said. "I'm here because there were people like those abolitionists who were willing to reach out."

Martha Rollins, the founder and chief executive officer of Boaz & Ruth, said the goal of the film series "is that we come together in wholeness, which is the mission of Boaz & Ruth. That we cross the dividing line, whether it's race or money or education or geography, because when we finally connect, there's power. It's really about transforming old attitudes and thoughts into strength."

As a result of 1960s-era efforts to change society, "we made such great strides in changing the law," Rollins said. "But as Dr. King said, 'It's not just about changing the law, but changing the heart.'"

Hearts opened this evening in Highland Park, as black and white people sat around a glass table and confronted the chapter of U.S. history most at odds with its ideals. Smaller, more personal histories were also examined.

Brent Reed, incarcerated before landing at Boaz & Ruth in September, said it had been his habit to act out his rage and disown his shortcomings.

"It was easy for me to blame the white man or anyone else," he said. "The thing that stood out for me in the movie was the white man who tried to help the people. That's a big flip side for me."

Reed said he has come to realize that "a lot of my mistakes came on me. Now I can look at people differently."

"I have black people I have harmed in my past who don't open their arms to me . . . but today I'm trying to change."

The evening's theme of emancipation, coupled with the freedom of expression, had John R. Pope Jr., the city's new director of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, pondering possibilities.

Amid the city's problems, "Here's a small pocket of people sitting around watching this movie," he said. But small pockets of people, as the movie showed, can make a tremendous difference.

Just as two of the four escaped slaves did not live to experience freedom, some in the room may fall by the wayside, he said. But others "are maybe just a little closer to Canada than they were when they got here."

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