

Mother Jones lectures at Women's Exchange in Winnetka

By Elaine Fandell

The name Mother Jones conjures up dim memories of high school history lessons. But on a recent morning in Winnetka, Mother Jones came alive at the Women's Exchange.

Actress Betsy Means delivered a rousing speech based on Mothers Jones' own writings during the nascent labor movement at the turn of the 20th century.

"Sisters, fellow citizens," Means greeted her audience in a brogue reflecting Mother Jones' Irish roots. "The day of child slavery has got to end," she said as she began recounting the events that led Mother Jones to take a group of children on a trek to see President Teddy Roosevelt.

Means stood before an American flag on a portable speaker's stand in the main room of the Women's Exchange complex adjacent to the Winnetka Community House and addressed an audience of about 40 women. It was Means' first performance of "The March of the Mill Children," which she adapted from speeches given by Mother Jones.

Jones' idea for the march came when, at age 73, she traveled to Philadelphia in June 1903 to support striking

textile workers, who included children as young as age 5. In a speech she gave near the Liberty Bell, the fiery Jones proclaimed that "Philadelphia's mansions are built on the broken bones and quivering hearts of these children." The publicity she received for the speech gave Mother Jones the idea of taking the children on a 130-mile trip from Philadelphia to the president's home on Oyster Bay, Long Island.

After her hour-long performance, Means returned in contemporary dress to discuss Mother Jones with the audience.

"The march had an effect," Means said, but laws protecting workers were not actually passed by Congress until the 1930s.

"What would Mother Jones be doing today?" asked one audience member.

"She'd be protesting child labor in the diamond mines of Africa and the sweatshops of Asia," Means responded, quoting Jones' words. "I'm not a reformer. I raise hell."

Means distributed a flier on "the state of the world's children, 2002," which reported that in the United States and Canada, 20 percent of the children live in poverty.



Mother Jones as portrayed by Betsy Means.



Betsy Means relaxes after her performance.

Means and partner Eileen Vorbach put on performances of women in history under the name WomanInCore. For bookings, call 773-866-9847.