

Celebration of Youth event hears Antwone Fisher

By CARRIE WOOD
Bellevue Reporter

These days, people listen to what Antwone Fisher has to say.

It wasn't always that way. "Growing up, I never felt like anything I had to say was important," he told a crowd of 500 at a Friends of Youth benefit luncheon Tuesday, March 18 at the Meydenbauer Center in Bellevue. "I remember how hopeless the future seemed when I was a kid."

Fisher, who grew up in foster homes and survived the brutalities of abuse and homelessness, now works in Hollywood as a director, screenwriter, author and film producer. His New York Times bestselling novel, "Finding Fish, a Memoir," reflects on his life as a sailor in the United States Navy and as a child growing up as a ward of the State of Ohio. His novel was turned into a film in 2002, directed by and starring Denzel Washington.

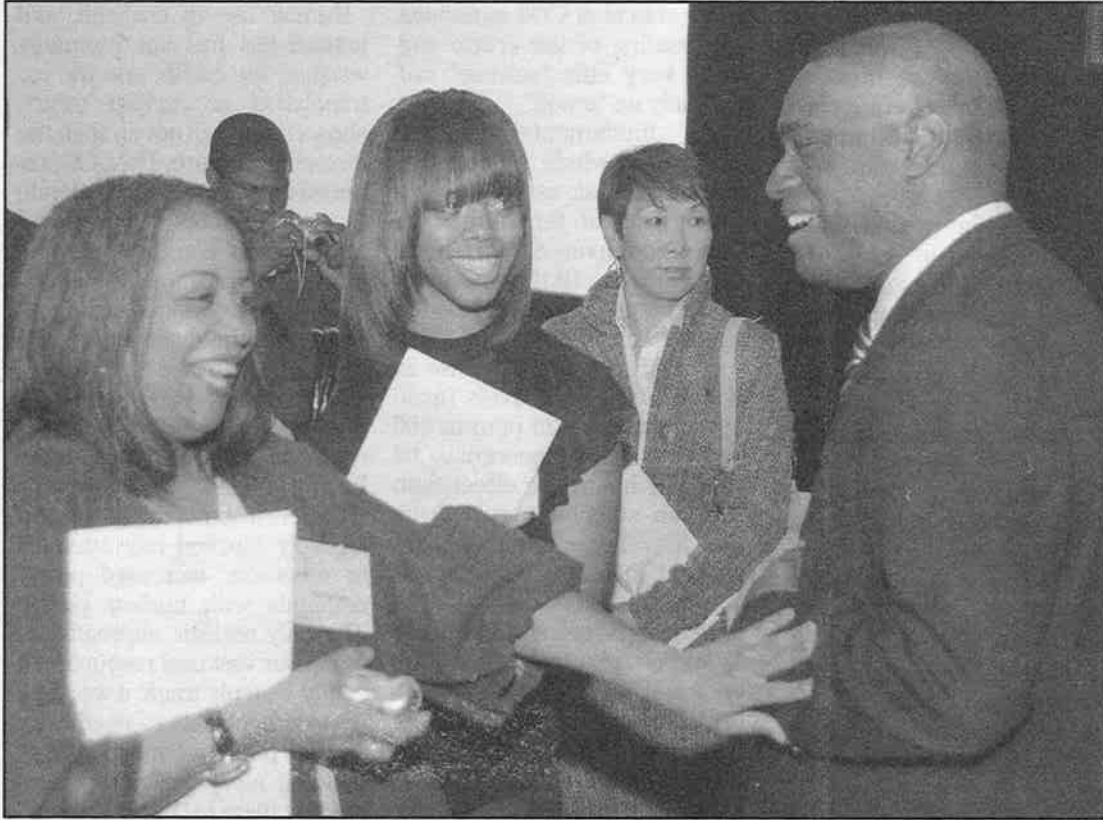
During the Celebration of Youth event, which raised \$185,000, Fisher spoke about his life growing up - one that parallels the lives of so many Eastside youth, said Ed Belleba, Friends of Youth president and CEO.

The Redmond-based organization serves approximately 13,000 Eastside youth and young adults each year. It operates emergency youth shelters in Bellevue and Kenmore, giving homeless teens a safe place to stay. The organization's New Ground supportive housing facilities in Redmond, Bothell and Kirkland offer longer-term housing for young mothers, previously homeless young adults and couples with children. In addition, Friends of Youth provides therapeutic foster homes for youth who have special needs and require treatment.

Dressed in a black suit and tie, Fisher faced the audience with a confidence that comes from survival, but with a soft voice scarred by silence.

His life, he said, started out bleak, born in a prison to his 17-year-old mother. His father, 23, was a nightclub singer and was shot before Fisher was even born. Right away, he became a ward of the state and was placed into foster care.

After spending two years in his first foster home, he was taken away from his foster mother, who had grown "too close." He spent the next 12 years with a foster family who had several children of their own, where he was physically, emotionally and sexually



Hartman Photography photo
Fans gather around Antwone Fisher after his talk at a benefit luncheon hosted by Friends of Youth on Tuesday, March 18 in Bellevue.

Friends of Youth

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abused. He recalled being tied to a beam in a dark basement for several hours at a time.

"My foster mother wanted to continue making money because this was a job for her," he recalled. "I wasn't there because she wanted me there."

By the time Fisher was 10 years old, he didn't see anything bright in the world, except through his childhood friends. He was eventually placed back into the orphan-

age, where he stayed for six months.

"I didn't want anyone to say they loved me. By the time I was 10, I didn't trust anybody, so I wanted to stay at the orphanage," Fisher said.

After he graduated from the George Junior Republic school for boys, where he sought refuge for several years, he became an emancipated minor at 17 and stayed at a YMCA in Cleveland. A man named Butch, a pimp, offered Fisher a job picking up cash from hookers. Many of the prostitutes Fisher encountered were children and "the longer I stayed on the streets, the more I could see how that could happen. One girl told

me that junkies exchange their kids for heroin."

He later got away from Butch, who often beat him, and slept on park benches and in store fronts. The colder the weather was, the more crowded the store fronts became, he said. To survive, he panhandled and shoplifted potato chips and other food. Sometimes he became so hungry he felt like he was losing his mind, he said.

"That smell the shelters had and the storefronts had

we called the down-and-out smell," Fisher said. "I had it on my body and my clothes. I was only 17 and smelled like I was down and out."

He tried to stand closer to the curb where he thought people would see him, but "those who have their lives in order didn't see me - they didn't want to."

Fisher served in the Navy for 11 years and a psychiatrist helped him see that he was worth something. His psychiatrist also encouraged him to find out where he was from and that life doesn't start at childhood. He eventually found his mother and other family members.

"We all have different beginnings," Fisher told the audience. "But we owe one another the help that we can give each other."

On the Eastside, there are "real problems, although many times they are hidden," Belleba said after the event. "As all the cities become bigger and more urban in nature, communities need agencies like Friends of Youth to be able to address the problems that are only going to become more prevalent."

Fisher urged community members to start thinking about the reality that homelessness exists.

"If you start considering the idea that there are people who are less fortunate, then you'll start seeing them."

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