

'Lady Beth' hits home

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More than 3,000 miles separate Vernon, California and Freehold, New Jersey, but the despair union workers in those communities feel is identical.

The hopelessness, loss of self worth, heartbreak and thoughts of ending it all easily transcend the miles because the situations are so similar.

In 1982, the Bethlehem Steel company in Vernon closed its doors, leaving more than 2,000 steelworkers unemployed. Earlier this year the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, more commonly known as 3M, in Freehold Township, shut down most of its operations, putting more than 370 men and women out of workers.

Recently, six of the 2,000 workers left jobless by the closing of Bethlehem Steel, created a play called "Lady Beth" to tell others about their plight, a plight that is also being felt right in Freehold Township.

"People put their lives into the plant and then the plant turns around and picks up and leaves," said Stanley Fischer, president of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union Local 8-760, which represents workers at the 3M facility on Willowbrook Road. "It's very similar to what happened here. It has deep psychological implications."

"Lady Beth," touring nationally under sponsorship initiated by Freehold native Bruce Springsteen, will stop in Monmouth County for performances at 8 p.m. Sunday at the Stone Pony, Ocean Avenue, Asbury Park, and at 10 a.m. Monday at Freehold Boro High School, Robertsville Road. Tickets are \$7 and are available through Ticketron.

The show, in the form of a concert reading by the six steelworkers, followed by an audience discussion, was created by a Los Angeles actress and director, Susan Franklin Tanner, the wife of one of the ex-steelworkers who appears in "Lady Beth."

"This show is so necessary," Ms. Tanner said during a telephone interview Monday night. "People are being devastated by plant closures across the country."

Reached in Washington, where the group will perform today for elected officials and government employees, Ms. Tanner said every person should see the play.



FISCHER — "It has deep psychological implications."

"It's not just about some unemployed steelworkers from California," she stressed. "It's the story of every working person in America. You might say, 'no it will never happen to me,' but it might."

"Do you think these men performing ever thought they would lose their jobs," she queried. "Of course not. But the company they worked for and which they thought of in a family way abandoned them. And they were left to pick of the pieces."

The show, Ms. Tanner said, is in three parts: a 50-minute play, a 90-minute discussion and reflective period.

The performance segment of "Lady Beth" — which starts off with a recording of Springsteen's ballad "My Hometown" — was fashioned into a script by writer Rob Sullivan and directed by Darrell Larson.

Their material came from the poetry and prose of the steelworkers who star in the production.

"The script comes from the heart, how the men feel about being unemployed and how they felt when their plant closed," Ms. Tanner said. "It's still the men talking and expressing their feelings, nothing has been changed."

It was one month after "Lady Beth" had been running at the Ensem-

ble Studio Theatre/L.A., that Springsteen provided the seed money and created a support committee, including such entertainment figures as Ed Asner and Paul Winfield, to sponsor the two-month, 16 city-tour, which will include stops as such industrial centers as Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Cleveland and Detroit.

"What's important is that it (Bethlehem Steel) is not an isolated incident," said Fischer. "Plant closings are being an everyday way of life."

"We're seeing a general deindustrialization of the country and as a result," he said, "we are seeing more and more plant closures, like 3M and Ciba Geigy. And it's not going to end there."

Ms. Tanner said response to the play, which has already been produced in Chicago and Minnesota has been "overwhelming."

"People have been blown away by the play," she said. "People who have been devastated by the closures find someone they can sympathize with and young people and adults find out about a part of life they may not have been exposed to."

Having the play come to Freehold and Asbury Park, Fischer said, may help area residents understand what the 3M employees are going through.

"Some people have been certified for trade adjustment assistance, entitling them to additional unemployment benefits," he said, "but a lot are still unemployed."

Former employees have formed "Workers Against Shutdowns" a lobbying group to protect workers and the Workers Resource Center, which will aid dislocated employees will be in operation within two weeks, Fischer said, but more must be done.

"This is the civil rights movement of the 1980s and 1990s," he said. "We can't prevent all plant closings, but what we have to prevent is damage to the people."

"We're not asking for something far out. The Department of Environmental Protection has laws to protect the environment and companies that break the laws have to restore the environment. Why can't these companies also restore the people."

"When a plant closes down it causes psychological damage and people lose their homes," he said. "Maybe this play will make us all think a little harder. Maybe we should all put ourselves in those actors' shoes."