

Activist expresses message of connection, spirit

By KASEY HAWRYSZ
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JASPER — For renowned activist Julia Butterfly Hill, the question is not whether miracles happen — it's a question of how to take advantage of the daily miracle of our lives.

"Every time a breath happens, we are a miracle in motion," Hill, 36, said. "And how do we want to live our lives in a way that honors that miracle? That makes sure we juice that miracle for all it's worth?"

On Monday evening, Hill — who famously spent two years during the late 1990s in a centuries-old redwood tree named Luna near Stafford, Calif., to prevent it from being cut down — spoke to at least 60 people at Vincennes University Jasper Campus



Hill

came to Jasper because the newly formed Center for Community Empowerment has started an Indiana chapter of the program, which is aimed at trying to help people find their "purpose, power and passion," according to the center's founder, Michael Hicks. What's Your Tree classes are offered in Jasper, Bloomington, Bedford and Indianapolis.

about her time in Luna, the importance of communication and community activism.

Hill, the founder of a nationwide program called What's Your Tree,

Hill also spoke to Forest Park High School juniors at the school Monday.

The What's Your Tree program was designed to not only help individuals find what they are passionate about, but also to help them learn how to work in community to achieve goals, Hill said.

"The problems that we face as a humanity are pretty huge, and part of the reason we face so many problems is because we've lost what community connection means," she said, citing that we don't know where our food comes from and don't take care of our elders the way we used to.

She and the fellow founders of What's Your Tree wanted to help create sustained, long-term activism within communities that is coming from a positive place.

"My work has really been

about trying to support people getting active in the world today, and getting active in a way that has our hearts and our spirits be engaged ... not just our minds," she said. "And have people really be active from a place of love and of respect, instead of always being active from a place of anger and frustration and judgment.

"If we want to heal the wounds in the outward landscape, we have to heal the wounds in the inner landscape as well. And if we want to end the clear-cutting of the forests — we can't end it if we're clear-cutting one another through our words and behaviors."

Hill, who started her presentation with a 20-minute video filmed on Day 42 of what would be 738 days in the tree, also discussed her experiences during that two-year stretch from late 1997 to 1999. She

recalled vicious 40 mph winds that send the platform where she was living bucking, helicopters trying to scare her out of the tree and the security guards hired to guard the tree in hopes that she would be starved out when supplies couldn't be lifted to her.

Among the most poignant stories was her tale of a Thanksgiving Day when shots rang out way too near her for comfort. Drunken loggers, who had permission to hunt deer on the land, were shooting at her. Despite her fear and anger, Hill remained calm and started talking to them about their lives for hours, forging an unlikely connection between the two sides. Days later, those same loggers surprised Hill, who is a

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"joyous vegan," by filling her supply bag with organic fruits and vegetables when a supervisor wasn't looking.

She talked about the importance of such communication in everyone's life, noting that one of the most important things she has learned in the tree is to "ask questions and actually care about the answers," as well as the power of humor. She learned a lot about log-

ging while she was sitting in the tree just by talking to the workers, many of whom were fourth- and fifth-generation loggers, she said.

"I had to ask myself, 'Am I more committed to being connected, or am I more committed to being right?'" she said, as the audience laughed.

She also addressed the idea of courage, the translation of which means "from the heart."

"If we face fear and we choose to act from our heart anyway,

courage happened," she said. "If we face apathy, violence, anger, grief and choose to act from our heart anyway, courage just happened. To choose to be crazy enough to care in the world today, and then act from that place of care, is a courageous stand and it's something we need to celebrate in ourselves and celebrate in one another."

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