

Sisterhood is powerful at conference for girls

Self-esteem, future success in spotlight at nonprofits' event

Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2009

Nearly 300 African-American women and girls showed up Saturday at the College of Southern Maryland in La Plata to participate in a conference that was designed to bolster self-esteem and empower girls to follow their dreams into successful futures.

The Young Women of Color Conference for All Races ran from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the Center for Business and Industry building on campus. The conference was sponsored by nonprofit organizations Young Women of Distinction and Hip-Hop Education, the college's Educational Talent Search program and the Charles County government.

Stefanie Magness, president and founder of Young Women of Distinction in Brandywine, said the second annual conference was a great way for young women and their parents, guardians and caretakers to learn how to love themselves and believe in their talents — essential ingredients everyone needs to carve out a successful future.

The theme of the conference was "I Am Powerful."

"This conference is a one-stop place for young women to hear positive messages from positive and successful women and men," she said, adding that her organization encourages girls 5 to 18 to work toward positions of



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Staff photos by NANCY BROMLEY McCONATY

Sisters Amber Smith, left, Miss Preteen Maryland Coed 2009, and Tiara Smith, Miss Jr. Teen Maryland United States 2009, spoke about how to work toward a successful future during the Young Women of Color Conference for Girls of All Races held Saturday at the College of Southern Maryland in La Plata.



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work toward positions of personal, political and professional leadership. "Young women will walk away from this conference feeling that they have a voice and that they're powerful. They'll know that they can make a difference and be somebody."

Sabrina Wiggins and her brother, Ben Wiggins, are the founders of Hip-Hop Education in Capitol Heights. The duo began the nonprofit organization in 2004 to encourage boys and girls to be creative and use their musical and dance talent through hip-hop music that sends a positive message.

The group performed during the conference.

"We want to teach young ladies how to have a powerful voice," Sabrina Wiggins said. "We want them to know that they can accomplish anything they set their mind to. I hope these young women will walk away from this conference inspired to make a difference in the community no matter what anyone tells them."

"This event will help empower our young women and give them life skills to make wise choices that promote educational advancement," said Wessita McKinley, CEO and founder of Sistas United in Cheltenham. The group consists of women who are dedicated to improving themselves, caring for their families and giving back to the community. "This conference is an excellent idea because in society today there is so much crime and we're trying to cut down on crime and the number of teen pregnancies and high school dropouts."

The conference opened

with inspiring words from Charles County commissioners' Vice President Edith J. Patterson (D) and Prince George's County Council Chairwoman Marilyn M.



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Prince George's County Council Chairwoman Marilyn M. Bland was one of several guest speakers at the Young Women of Color Conference for Girls of All Races held Saturday at the College of Southern Maryland in La Plata.



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Shannon Douglas, left, and her mother, Kennetta Douglas, await the start of the conference Saturday.



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Sabrina Wiggins, left, CEO and co-founder of Hip-Hop Education and Stefanie Magness, founder and president of Young Women of Distinction, co-chaired the conference.



Charwoman Marilyn M. Bland (D).

"Yes, you are powerful," Bland said in her opening remarks. "If you don't know it now I promise you that by the end of the day you will feel a little bit different. ... Any obstacles that might be in your path will turn to dust if you believe in your own attributes."



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Shamia Stanley registers at the conference.

Patterson told the assembly that she is the first black Charles County commissioner and only the seventh woman to serve on the board in the county's 350-year history.

"I want young girls to see that I did it and that they can do it, too," she said. "I'm here to help you. That's my role."

Yadira Coleman of Bryans Road attended the conference with her mom, Yolanda Coleman.

"It sounds like it's going to be interesting," Yadira Coleman said early in the day. "I like to learn new things, and the conference sounds like fun."

"When I was growing up I was never afforded an opportunity like this," her mother said. "This is a learning experience and my daughter will grow because of it."

"I thought that this would be a real good event for my daughter to attend," said Upper Marlboro resident Kennetta Douglas. "It will help lead her to a good future."

"I came to the conference today to learn how to be a leader and a powerful young woman," Shannon Douglas, 17, and Kennetta Douglas' daughter, said.

Several organizations, including the Charles County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, attended the conference to show support for the program.

"We should have more of these conferences," said Patsy Chapman, who serves with the branch's youth council. "It's a positive reinforcement for the community."

"This is also a networking opportunity," added Farita Davis, who also serves with the youth council. "It's important to have organizations that support children."

Tela Jones, program director for Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, of Southern Maryland, said the conference promotes all of the ingredients to help young women make the right decisions for their future. CASA is a nonprofit group affiliated with the Center for Children in La Plata that works on behalf of abused and neglected children who are caught in the juvenile justice system.

"This conference is wonderful," Jones said. "I looked at the agenda and I'm just elated that there's going to be so much useful information available for young women that will help equip them as they move into adulthood."

The morning session included many guest speakers, including U.S. Rep. Donna F. Edwards (D-Md., 4th); Maureen Umeh, co-anchor of Fox 5 news; Surae Chinn, a reporter with WUSA9 news; Del. Gerron S. Levi (D-Prince George's); and Sonia Chase, a former player with the Women's National Basketball Association and founder of the Chase Your Dreams organization.

Justine Love, director of CBS Radio's community and public affairs office in Lanham, received the Community Spirit Award during the conference for her efforts in helping those less fortunate. Love, who lives in Washington, D.C., collaborated with the Young Women of Distinction and State Farm Insurance in Lanham to collect more than 1,000 gently used prom items that were donated to low-income teens in the area.

Love has also volunteered for 10 years with Safeway grocery stores in the District during the company's Feast of Sharing program that donates Thanksgiving dinners

during the company's Feast of Sharing program that donates Thanksgiving dinners to needy families in the area.

"People can call me for anything and the community knows it," she said. "I might not have an answer for them but I'll find it out.

"I'm elated about receiving the Community Spirit Award but I'm just doing what I've been put on this earth to do," she added. "I'm just a vehicle to help the community."

After a lunch break, the young women broke up into several work groups to discuss a variety of topics, including self-image, wellness, achievements of women of color and journaling.

Indian Head resident Leah Lancaster, 13, said she was looking forward to attending the conference.

"I'm going to learn that I am very important," she said.

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