

Women answer the challenge at Bev Smith Conference

Written by Rebecca Nuttall Special to the NNPA from the New Pittsburgh Courier
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Who is the African-American woman? Is she the caricature of Harriet Tubman presented in a recently released YouTube comedy video? Is she the women depicted in reality television shows? Is she the image portrayed in hip-hop videos and popular music?

Nationally syndicated radio show host Bev Smith says no and at a four-day conference held in Pittsburgh last week, she brought together hundreds of women from around the country to answer this question and more. The Bev Smith Show Presents: A Challenge to African American Women conference, which began Aug. 28, challenged women to take ownership of the mission "to unite and empower the Black family and community."



"The one thing we had when we didn't have money, was love. But we got hoodwinked and bamboozled by equality. We wanted integration and we got imitation," Smith said. "This is the challenge. The challenge is for us to be different because the only way we're going to save ourselves is to save ourselves."

The goal of the conference was to craft solutions to be presented to the Congressional Black Caucus. On hand to inspire this mission were noted names like spiritual leader Iyanla Vanzant, who headlined the conference's commemorative gala; comedian Dick Gregory; E. Faye Williams, national chair of the National Congress of Black Women; and Congresswoman Donna Christensen.



Also on hand was Elaine Richardson, an author and professor at the Ohio State University, who served as the keynote speaker at the conference's opening luncheon. Drawing tears from the audience, Richardson shared her story of overcoming years of abuse, drug addiction, and prostitution.

"I was looking like Lil Kim, Nikki Minaj; I was a street walker. I thought that's what I was worth," Richardson said. "When it's Black girls in the hood, they're just a ho; it's not considered human

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trafficking. No one cares."



But there were people who cared, including a professor who sparked Richardson's interest in African-American language and linguistics and led her on the path to success. Until this time, Richardson says she was highly influenced by social stereotypes and the media's presentation of African-American women, without knowing her history.

"People started sowing into my life. People started mentoring me. People loved me," Richardson said. "When you know who you are, it makes a difference. We're worth something and you can't throw people away."

The conference was supported in large part by River Industries Training Center, a female-owned nonprofit that trains unemployed, underemployed and at risk youth and adults for work in the oil and gas industry.

"I think women need to unite and organize. We have a 56 percent African-American unemployment rate in the Pittsburgh region and if we don't do something to help ourselves no one will," said Cheryl McAbee, River Industries co-founder. "The word minority is an outdated term. We need to think in terms of African-Americans because other minorities are surpassing us."