

COLLECTIVE VOICES

CONFERENCE NEWS - EXPERIENCES - REFLECTIONS - HIGHLIGHTS

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Luz Rodriguez: SisterSong's Visionary

Luz Rodriguez's early years as a child growing up in a community rich in community activism formed her as a future organizer and a person of consciousness.

"Community activism was infused in my childhood," Rodriguez said as she reflected on her childhood in the Lower East side of New York City. "I was a youth who benefited from community activism."

A 32-year community organizer and activist, Rodriguez, 47, grew from a community folkloric dancer, artist and writer to one of today's foremost women of color reproductive rights leaders.

Rodriguez, along with five other women of color activists, received a plaque of appreciation from the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective on Thursday, Nov. 13th during the SisterSong Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights National Conference's opening plenary.

The other women honored by the SisterSong Collective are Byllye Y. Avery, Mary Long, Virginia Davis-Floyd and Reena Marcelo.

Rodriguez was drawn to reproductive rights and

women of color when she was in college in New York City. "I found out that Puerto Rican women were being used as guinea pigs for the pill, Rodriguez said. "I didn't believe it."

Rodriguez said "My people were being used" for experimental purposes to determine the initial use of the birth control pill during the late 1970s. Rodriguez was in her early 20s at the time.

"Puerto Rican women died because they (were given) 10 times the dosage of today's 'normal' pill," Rodriguez said. She added that some of the adverse symptoms experienced by women who were given such extreme doses of the pill's toxins are blood clotting, liver clotting and tumors. Rodriguez said these initial tests of the pill on women of color were a means of introducing the practice of population control.

"It was population control of the (Puerto Rican) island that (the United States acquired as a result of the) Spanish-American war," Rodriguez said. "That's what opened my concern to reproductive justice."

Rodriguez said it was because of this injustice that she worked as the Interim Director of Casa Atabex Aché, Executive Director of the Latina Roundtable, and

the Interim Director of the Dominican Women's Development Center in New York City.

Rodriguez, who is credited as the founder of SisterSong, said that when she came up with the idea for the Collective, she didn't know how it would grow into a positive force.

"I developed a large vision," Rodriguez said. "The design of the collective was to bring the four ethnic groups togethergrass roots, state and national organizations, together."

Rodriguez said she was simply drawing circles on a napkin to help her visualize her idea of the Collective that later came to be called SisterSong. "I just saw myself as a conduit," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez is currently a bilingual training coordinator at the Foundation Center in New York City. Rodriguez trains representatives of nonprofit organizations on fundraising strategies and techniques. "Somehow it's coming full circle," Rodriguez said. "To be a fundraising conduit, for free...to be in a place I know best, to teach fundraising for free, it's very gratifying."

By Sararesa Begay

CORRECTIONS

The Editor sincerely regrets two errors that appeared in the Friday issue of *Collective Voices*.

Brenda Hutchinson was incorrectly identified as 'Barbara Hutchinson'.

Alice Skenandore's last name was misspelled.

We thank Brenda Hutchinson and Alice Skenandore for their gracious response to these unfortunate errors.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Profiles in Activism 2

Lest We Forget: "Venus Hottentot" 2

"The Women Gather" 3

Kemba Smith 4

Reflections 4

APIRH 5

Community Organizing & Learning Tools 5

Day's Highlights 6

Profiles of Activism: *Our Legacy, Our Future*

L. June Davis, 76, the eldest person at the SisterSong Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights National Conference, gives a big bear hug to 15-year-old Marisol Meijia, the youngest conference presenter.

"So glad you are here," Davis said as she hugged the young lady. Meijia shyly beams.

Meijia, a 15-year-old sophomore at Emiliano Zapata Street Academy in Oakland, Calif., began organizing last year when she was 14-years-old.

Meijia is scheduled to present along with Luisa Ortega at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 15th as part of the "We're Wonderful: Best Practices From Our Work" workshops. Meijia will speak about the "Nahui Ollin Teotl/The Essence of Four Movements: Young Women's Talking Circle, a program of the National Latina Health Organization.

"I'm going to tell (everyone) about myself," Meijia said softly. "I am a Xicana. I am the first person in my family who's into my (ethnic) roots."

Meijia said her parents, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico, aren't sure of their specific ethnic background.

Very carefully choosing her words, the bilingual Meijia explains that "Xicana" means "People – Earth – Yes", in the Nahuatl language.

"The 'Xi' means 'people,' 'Ca' means 'earth,' and 'Na' means 'yes,'" Meijia said as she wrote the explanation down on a small notebook.

Meijia said that in the Hispanic community some people have adopted the "Xicana" way of referring to themselves and others have kept the

***"I am the first person in my
family who's into my
(ethnic) roots."
Marisol Meijia ~ Age 15***

"Chicana" way of referring to themselves. Meijia explains that the use of the "X" is more reflective of people's connection to their indigenous heritage.

Meijia is involved in Together Organizing Justice for Indigenous Liberation (TOJIL) and attends meetings on Fridays, after school. Meijia said that one TOJIL's goals is getting military recruiters out of Oakland high schools.

Meijia observed that military recruiters specifically target immigrant students in their recruitment of high school students. Eventually, Meijia and her activist peers also want military recruiters out of Bay-area high schools and hope to have military recruiters banned from all of California's high schools.

"Instead of having college recruitment, they have military recruitment," Meijia said. "The military recruiters bribe students...they target immigrant students from Mexico, and Central and South America.

Meijia said that military recruiters don't

***"We are all suffering from
the same social diseases."***

L. June Davis ~ ageless

adequately inform immigrant recruits that they may get killed in the Iraqi war or that they will be on the 'front lines'.

Meijia's thoughts returned to the conference. She shared that she enjoyed the presentation given by Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa midwife, Alice Skenandore.

"I liked (her presentation)," Meijia said, adding that Skenandore discussed how women today give birth in a hospital setting. "It made me think about how, in the future, I am going to have my baby."

Davis, who is more than 60-years-old, openly hugs, visits and connects with other conference participants. Davis has her own cheering crowd and has easily made friends during the first two days of the conference. "I'm so excited," Davis said exuberantly. "I didn't go to bed until 3 a.m."

Davis, a cytotechnologist in the gastroenterology section of the Veterans Administration and UCLA Medical School, said being a scientist "you don't know how to look" at reproductive justice issues.

"We are all suffering from the same social diseases," Davis said. "You need to understand the same processes."

Davis said that while Indigenous people are trying to find a place to live, Black people are still dealing with social oppression and Asian people are "trying to get their foot in the door." "We are all trying (to achieve upward mobility)", Davis reflected.

Thinking of her new friend, Davis commented that young people like Meijia "blow me away".

By Sararesa Begay

Lest We Forget: *"Venus Hottentot", Dignity Denied*

In her short life, Saartjie "Sara" Baartman was displayed as a freak for being who she is.

Baartman, a South African Koi Koi

woman, was 20-years-old when she was stolen from her South African homeland to London.

Baartman was exhibited by her British

captors as a freak show exhibit that attracted hundreds to the Bartholomew Fair at London's Piccadilly Circus.

Baartman, also known as the

“Venus Hottentot” (Continued)

Venus Hottentot, was then taken to Paris by her British captors in 1814 where she was handed over to a showman who specialized in showcasing wild animals.

Baartman's anatomy was studied by three noted French naturalists, one of whom, Georges Cuviers, is now considered the founder of comparative anatomy. After her death, a plaster cast was made of Saartijie Baartman's body and her skeleton was preserved separately.

The skeletal remains and plaster representation of Baartman were placed on public display at the Museum National D'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, where, in death, she continued to be treated as a mere public attraction until the display was placed in museum storage in 1976.

Baartman's sexual organs and brain were unabashedly displayed in the Musee de l'Homme in Paris until as recently as 1985.

Baartman's remains were finally returned to South Africa in April 2002,



according to "Dawn the Internet", an online news resource maintained by Pakistan Herald Publication (Pvt) Limited. Baartman's remains were handed over to Brigitte Manbandla, the South African vice minister of culture, as well as to Thuthukile Edy Skweyiya, South Africa's ambassador to France, who then arranged for their return to South Africa where they were to be buried with full national honors.

A documentary film titled "The Life and Times of Sara Baartman - 'The Hottentot Venus'" was made by Zola

Maseko. The documentary uses historical drawings, cartoons, legal documents and interviews with noted cultural historians and anthropologists who portrayed this young African woman as a representation of savage sexuality and racial inferiority.

Those attending the SisterSong Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights Conference were given the opportunity to learn, listen and observe a part of Baartman's life as represented by Sojourner X, a public speaker and social change performance artist. Sojourner brought Baartman's story to life Friday evening in a special performance of "From Whores to Matriarchs: Black Women Survivors on the Edge".

By Sararesa Begay



The Women Gather (for Joe Strickland) by Nikki Giovanni

the women gather
because it is not unusual
to seek comfort in our hours of stress
a man must be buried

it is not unusual
that the old bury the young
though it is an abomination

it is not strange
that the unwise and the ungentle
carry the banner of humaneness
though it is a castration of the
spirit

it no longer shatters the intellect
that those who make war
call themselves diplomats

we are no longer surprised
that the unfaithful pray loudest
every Sunday in every church
and sometimes in rooms facing east
though it is a sin and a shame

so how do we judge a man

most of us love from our need to love
not
because we find someone deserving

most of us forgive because we have
trespassed not
because we are magnanimous

most of us comfort because we need
comforting
our ancient rituals demand that we
give
what we hope to receive

and how do we judge a man

we learn to greet when meeting
to cry when parting
and to soften our words at times of
stress

the women gather
with cloth and ointment

their busy hands bowing to laws that
decree
willows shall stand swaying but
unbroken
against even the determined wind of
death

we judge a man by his
dreams
not alone his deeds
we judge a man by his intent
not alone his shortcomings
we judge a man because it is
not unusual
to know him through those who love
him

the women gather strangers
to each other because
they have loved a man

it is not unusual to sift
through ashes
and find an unburnt picture

Kemba Smith: An Activist Not Deterred

Growing up as the only child of professional parents in a Richmond, Virginia suburb, Kemba Smith led an advantaged and sheltered childhood. After graduating from high school in 1989, Kemba left the security of her family to continue her education at prestigious Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia.

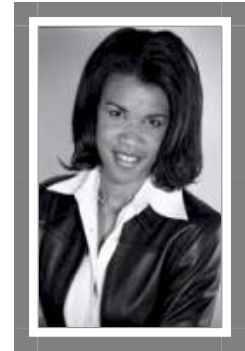
What happened to Kemba in her new campus environment is every parent's nightmare. Away from the protective watch of her mother and father and in an attempt to "fit in", Kemba fell in with the wrong crowd and became involved with a drug dealer. He was a major figure in a \$4 million dollar crack cocaine ring, who drew Kemba right into the middle of his life with physical, mental and emotional abuse disguised as "love".

Eventually, after enduring this turbulent four-year relationship in 1994, Ms. Smith was sentenced to 24.5 years and served 6.5 years in federal prison. She also gave birth to her first and only son while incarcerated. Fortunately, Ms. Smith regained her freedom after President Clinton granted her

clemency in December 2000. Her case drew support from those across the nation and the world in a crusade to reverse a disturbing trend in the rise of lengthy sentences for first time, non-violent drug offenders.

On Friday, November 14th, Ms. Smith addressed women of color at the SisterSong Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights Conference as a representative of the Drug Policy Alliance to speak on "The War on Drugs and Impact on Women of Color" as part of Friday's plenary panel titled "Each One, Teach One: Sharing Your Work and Experiences.

Ms. Smith's traumatic real life experience forces today's students to listen in hope that they will recognize that there are consequences to their life choices. In May 2002, Ms. Smith graduated from Virginia Union University with a bachelor's degree in Social Work and plans to attend law school in the future. She was recently awarded a Soros Justice Postgraduate Fellowship for advocates. This two year grant will enable Ms. Smith to inspire youth to become educated



about certain injustices within the criminal justice system and unify effective leaders/advocates in the struggle for change, with the intent of generating community mobilization and action. This, she believes, is her mission.

For more information about Kemba Smith and her work, contact her at the Kemba Smith Foundation, P.O. Box 2455, Richmond, VA 23218, 804-730-1123, kembasmithfoundation.org.

Compiled by Lisa Diane White

Participants Reflect on Their Conference Experience

I FELT....

- *35 when I arrived . It's all the youthful zest and intellect. [A 55-year old.]*
- *Strength*
- *Excited, thrilled uplifted, supported*
- *I Belonged*
- *Welcomed*
- *Young all over*
- *Relaxed and comfortable for once. My mainstream organization always has me feeling, tense, under-appreciated and "on" - Ahh. Its so nice to exhale.*
- *Beautiful people, REAL beautiful People. REAL unapologetic beauty!*

I LEARNED...

- *To watch my homophobia when talking about brothers operating on the down-low!*
- *Norplant One has been removed from the contraceptive market and Norplant Two has taken it's place.*
- *If you are convicted of a crime and sentenced to serve time (30-days to life) the government expects you not to be sexual. Henceforth no barrier methods are offered to people having sex in prison because they are not.*

I THOUGHT...

- *I thought this is awesome! Keep the good thing going*
- *I wouldn't be fully welcomed. I was wrong. Thanks*
- *This is incredible. The evolutionary zeal and intellectual energy is astounding.*
- *The womyn warrior from INCITE is a BAD ASS*
- *About the past, and myself as an individual*

Asian and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health

Eveline Shen, the Executive Director of Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH), said she and her colleagues work to focus on those individuals with the least visibility for the betterment of all.

"We focus on those with the least power like Southeast Asians," Shen said. "If you bring the least person up, everyone benefits."

Shen who has been Executive Director of the Oakland, California-based organization for the last six years said one of the challenges that the organization deals with is the ethnic diversity of the Asian people.

"There are so many ethnic groups for Asians in terms of our language, our history, culture," Shen said. "We have diverse histories...such as immigrating to the United States. We came for the opportunity to (establish ourselves) in the United States and experienced forced relocation.

Shen said East Asians such as the Korean, Japanese and Chinese people have, for the most part, done very well for themselves, but the Southeast Asians, such as the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian, are struggling, as refugees of war.

The wars created by the United States government in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos have displaced numerous

Southeast Asians who have little resources to get established in the United States, Shen said.

"Between 30 percent and 54 percent Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodians, and Native Hawaiians live in poverty in the United States," Shen said.

The Laotian people, otherwise known as Hmong people, have the highest rate of poverty. "Ninety-six percent of the Hmong population live in poverty," Shen said. "For Asians in California, unemployment has doubled in seven years, and the highest percentage of Asians in America that are on welfare are Cambodian and Laotian."

"Many of our youth and families are on welfare," Shen said, noting that Southeast refugee war survivors' experiences are complex. "Part of it (the problem) is, being Laotian survivors of war...it's very difficult.

Shen said issues such as social, economic and political oppression and discrimination impacts people's bodies; "it's part of reproductive health".

"We do activism to mobilize communities," Shen said. "It is very important to reach out to our women to develop our own leaders to reach out for reproductive rights."

Shen noted that occasionally this is may be difficult in the Asian community



because some Asians are hesitant to organize and become activists in their communities due to their complex war refugee background. "There are a lot of reasons," Shen said, "that their voices may not be heard."

Shen said that this is why the younger generation is ideally the focus for leadership development. Youth development leadership targets those between the ages of 14-17 and 17-20, Shen said, adding that many young people are more connected to the United States.

Another APIRH project is organizing for better work environments for Asian women in the garment and electronics industries, Shen said. Shen said that the work conditions in both industries are dangerous to women's health and don't offer salaries or benefits that would enable women and families to achieve and maintain good health.

By Sararesa Begay

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Day's Highlights: Saturday, November 15th

PLENARY PANEL 10: BRAVE NEW WOMEN: FINDING AND INTERPRETING OUR OWN FACTS

9:00-10:30 ~ Cosby Auditorium ~ Page 33 of Conference Program

Latonya Slack, JD ~ Executive Director ~ California Black Women's Health Project: Grassroots African AMERICAN WOMEN AFFECTING PUBLIC POLICIES: A CASE STUDY OF CABWHP

Lynn Roberts, PhD ~ Hunter College, City University of New York: PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH FOR GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS

WORKSHOPS I ~ WE'RE WONDERFUL: BEST PRACTICES FOR OUR WORK

Nahui Ollin Teotl/The Essence of Four Movements : Young Women's Talking Circle

Luisa Ortega and Marisol Meijia ~ National Latina Health Organization

10:30—12:00pm ~ Cosby Room 103 ~ Page 33 of Conference Program

Robbing Marginalized Women of Their Fertility: C.R.A.C.K. and Population Control

Committee on Women, Population and the Environment: Toni Bond, Theryn Kigvamasud'vashti, and Judith Scully; Erika Derkas, New Mexico Highlands University

10:30-12:00pm ~ Cosby Room 215 ~ Page 35 of Conference Program

Identity and Ethnicity in the Construction of Gender (In Spanish and English)

Dominican Women's Development Center: Renee Munoz, Hortensia Gonzales, Anel Nicasio

10:30-12:00pm ~ Cosby Room 224 ~ Page 36 of Conference Program

WORKSHOPS II ~ SAY IT LOUD: PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY FOR AND BY WOMEN OF COLOR

Indigenous Women and the Boarding School Healing Project: Accountability and Reparations

Tonya Gonnella Frichner, JD (Onondaga); Andrea Smith (Western Cherokee); Eulynda Toledo-Benalli, PhD (Dine'); Sherry Funmaker Wilson (Hocak Wazijaci); Loretta Rivera (Seneca)

1:00-2:30pm ~ Cosby Room 104 ~ Page 38 of Conference Program

WORKSHOP III ~ TAKING FORWARD-LOOKING ACTIONS

Reaching Men: Educating, Mobilizing and Organizing Men as Allies

Rus Funk, MSW ~ Mobilizing to End Violence (M.E.N.); Sulaiman Nuriddin ~ Men Stopping Violence

4:30-6:00pm ~ Cosby Room 219 ~ Page 44 of Conference Program

A Healthy Love Party: Having Fun Having Safer Sex | Microbicides: The Future of Prevention for Women

Nyrobi Moss ~ SisterLove, Inc.; Juanita Williams ~ Project AZUKA, Inc.; Dia Hodnett, MPH

4:30-6:00pm ~ Cosby Lower Level 27 ~ Page 45 of Conference Program

CULTURAL EXPLOSION! ~ SISTERS' JAM: A NIGHT OF RHYTHM AND CULTURE

7:00-10:00pm ~ LLC II Auditorium ~ Page 47 of Conference Program



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