

COLLECTIVE VOICES

CONFERENCE NEWS - EXPERIENCES - REFLECTIONS - HIGHLIGHTS

Thursday, November 13, 2003

Volume 1 : Issue 1

Diverse Voices

Over 500 activists have gathered in Atlanta to participate in the first SisterSong Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights National Conference. Today marks the first day of this historic and exceptional opportunity for women of color activists from around the world.

Over the next four days, Conference participants will focus their attention upon strengthening and furthering efforts to ensure and improve the reproductive health and rights of women of color and to lay the groundwork for a national women of color reproductive health and rights movement.

The Conference is a time for both seasoned and burgeoning activists to reflect upon our work, expand our knowledge, celebrate our accomplishments, and develop and refine our strategies. Today we choose to celebrate and acknowledge the power of individual activism, the power of diversity, and the power of collective organizing by sharing the thoughts of sister warriors who have gathered here. Perhaps you will find your thoughts reflected in the words of the women quoted here.

"I hope this event will help to raise awareness on the connectedness of reproductive health to other issues affecting women of color, including trafficking of women and girls, domestic violence and women in post-conflict situations."

-- Namju Cho, MPP
Advocacy Coordinator
Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking (CAST)

"The Sister Song conference is an historic event. Women of color will be there in force to challenge and redefine reproductive health and rights to be more inclusive and representative of diverse communities. This is only going to make the women's movement a stronger force to be reckoned with."

~ Lourdes Rivera, National Health Law Program

"For Indigenous women, it's important that we control our own bodies... it's another way to exercise our sovereignty. It's exciting to work on a movement by and for women of color for the wide range of issues that comprise reproductive health for our communities."

~Sherry A. Wilson, Women of All Red Nations, INCITE and Communications Coordinator

"SisterSong represents our voices in harmony speaking

our truths. The melodies may be good, bad, ugly or indifferent, but it is our gathering, our agenda, and our music ... sharing perspectives, research and experiences on (re)production."
~ Safiya Bandele, Center for Women's Development
Medgar Evers College

"I'm very thrilled to attend the conference because of all the new sisters I'm going to meet and hopefully, make new friends. I have always believed that we women are more healthier than men because we come together, we love each other and show it, we protect each other when we are hurt by men or the establishment, we share feelings and experiences without shame and especially, if we are Latinas, we not only cultivate our sisterhood but pass it on to our daughters, granddaughters, etc. When I get there I want to charge my emotional and spiritual battery by sharing with new sisters and I want them to receive the same from me. These are the connections we can build on, for these are the connections that last forever!"
~Mary Rivera

"The Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity (COLOR) is honored to participate in the Sister Song conference and to contribute to the important work of sustaining the voice of women of color in the reproductive rights and health movement. COLOR members look forward to a productive conference filled with information,

inspiration, empowerment, collaboration, community and sisterhood."

~Jacinta "Jacy" Montoya, Melanie Herrera Bortz and Dusti Gurule, Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity (COLOR)

"We at the National Women's Alliance are looking forward to connecting with a range of grassroots activists and leaders engaged in reproductive rights work in the context of racial and economic justice. We hope to leave the conference with fresh ideas, a cohesive vision, and attainable strategies for linking our struggles to the experiences of women all over the world

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Diverse Voices (Continued)

who are fighting for human rights, authentic choices and dignity for themselves, their families and communities.”
~Laila Mehta, Program Director, National Women’s Alliance

“I am always excited to meet with the companeras at SisterSong because I learn so much. There are so many collective years of wisdom and experience that I am inspired to keep going in my work even when it gets hard. The most important is the personal connection we have which is born out of our common goal of empowering women of color to be healthy and LIVE! The special part is that we practice this amongst ourselves and look out for each other’s health and general well-being in life. The world seems a lot smaller when you can

count your sisters around the globe.”
~Laura Jimenez

“I am very enthusiastic about attending the Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights National conference. I have been out of the scientific loop for more than seventeen years. As a cytotechnologist in the gastroenterology section of the Veterans Administration and UCLA Medical School, I participated in the original protocol for endoscopy, colonoscopy and other gastrointestinal procedures on patients who had HIV or were positive for AIDS. This included techniques for sterilizing instruments, surgical rooms and sterile techniques for patients and medical personnel. I will be happy to hear any progress in the worldwide HIV and AIDS battle,

then I can make a decision on where my volunteer efforts could be best utilized in the Los Angeles area. I expect to leave the conference like Dorothy from the Wizard of OZ...clicking my heels. I may not need an airplane to get home, this powerful conference will be the wind beneath my wings (smiles.)”

~L. June Davis, Marina del Ray, Calif.

By Sararesa Begay

Loretta Ross: The Work Continues

“What happened to me, shouldn’t happen to another person,” said Loretta Ross as she remembered when she found out she was sterilized by a defective intra-uterine device.

At age 23, Ross said she lost her reproductive ability. Ross who is the SisterSong Coordinator and Founder/ Executive Director of the National Center of Human Rights Education has come away from her experience of sterilization to help women of color keep their right to have children through her work in social justice and women’s causes.

“For a long time for women working on this issue were misunderstood,” Ross said. “Our work was considered ‘genocide’ because of abortion. However, (policy makers and society) doesn’t stop to look at the complexities

of our lives as women of color.”

Ross, 50, said she believes women of color have a right to have children. Ross, a 12-year Atlanta resident, organized the first national women of color reproductive health conference in 1987 at Howard University in Washington, D.C. where 400 women of color attended the event.

She said it was through that conference 16 years ago, that she met many of her current social justice colleagues, friends and associates. “Many of the activists today are born out of that conference,” Ross said, adding that she’s pleased at how far some women activists have come. “It’s amazing,” Ross said. “One love posse.”

Ross said through her work in social

“For a long time women working on this issue were misunderstood.”

: Loretta Ross :

justice, she’s seen that there is a disconnect of saving our women and our children. “I think women are socialized to take care of their family and then themselves,” Ross said. “People are starting to realize that the all-functional mother needs to take care of herself to have a healthy family and children.”

Ross was born in San Antonio, Texas, and “hop scotched” across the country as a child in a military family. Before moving to Atlanta, Ross was a 20-year Washington, D.C. resident. Ross is a mother of a 35-year-old son, and has an 8-year-old grandchild.

By Sararesa Begay

SisterSong Award Recipient: Mary Long

Mary Long saw the emotional and physical trauma of women who had to experience back alley abortions.

Long, 62, was in the middle of her nursing career at an Atlanta hospital in the early 1960s and 1970s, when she

saw mostly black women who had illegal abortions.

“I’ve seen the results of women who had underground abortions,” Long said. “They would come in lifeless... almost near death.”

Long said black women didn’t have access to legal abortion, and that back-alley abortions most often resulted in hysterectomies or major infections.

Long is one of five women who are

Mary Long (Continued)

scheduled to receive 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 who will be honored by the SisterSong Collective are Bylye Avery, Luz Rodriquez, Virginia Davis-Floyd and Reena Marcelo.

"The Collective wanted to honor (Long) for being a foremother of the movement of women's reproductive rights," Loretta Ross, Coordinator of this year's Conference, and founder of the National Center for Human Rights Education. "The award will be known as the 'Sisters on Whose Shoulders We Stand Award.'"

Ross said the Collective felt it was also

important to honor Long for her participation in the *Doe vs. Bolton* case.

The *Doe vs. Bolton* case was the second case to go to the Supreme Court in 1973 to decide the legality of abortion, according to Long. Long was part of the amicus brief of the *Doe vs. Bolton* case.

"I am honored and pleased that people have chosen me (for the recognition)," Long said. "It was just the right thing to do."

Currently, the accomplished Long, who has a long list of awards and accomplishments, is an active community volunteer who left the hospital setting in 1985. She has been active in numerous community activities such as the WIN board and PAC, two organizations that contribute to pro-choice Democratic women.

Long who is a 43-year Atlanta resident



"It was just the right thing to do"

SisterSong Award Recipient Mary Long

is also on the Atlanta Women Foundation Board of Directors and is involved in the Feminist Women's Health Center. Long also started two clinics in Atlanta for homeless women and their children.

Long said she gets involved in community and women's social causes because "that improves (the) quality of life" for people.

By Sararesa Begay

Self-Help Methodology for Wellness

Health is not merely the absence of illness but the active promotion of wellness of this and future generations. This was my foundation when I started my first self-help group under the guidance of Lillie Allen, trainer for the National Black Women's Health Project (NBWHP). But what exactly is self-help? The term has been tossed around for years and many sisters struggle with the meaning. For some reason I never did. The word **self** was in there and **help** and that meant **ME!** Self-help became a strategy for me and other women to actively pursue our wellness by supporting each other in addressing emotional, spiritual, mental and physical health concerns in our lives.

The impact of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism, etc. has influenced our lives and health. Self-help supports women in becoming more aware of the impact of oppression on our lives. These oppressions are interlocking and affect us, even when we believe ourselves to be surviving and thriving in our personal and working lives. Self-help affirms our experiences as Women of Color and supports us as we become more aware of the

oppressive systems we face within the broader social/political/economic context that is our reality. Self-help allows us to take control of our lives and support each other to do the same.

NBWHP suggests that five strategic steps toward wellness be incorporated in to self-help activities and goals.

1. **Awareness:** become conscious of your personal health needs and learn how to meet these needs.
2. **Coalescing:** build unity among Women of Color around our health concerns and ultimately all of our needs. By sharing experiences, problems and solutions with one another we can develop a common bond, sharing a common struggle.
3. **Taking Control:** is necessary

"Women of color learn from other women of color how to be with each other based on the rich legacy of the National Black Women's Health Project."

for promoting, maintaining our wellness, and necessary for promoting, maintaining our wellness and becoming more actively involved in our lives. We make conscious and purposeful decisions and feel empowered and strong.

4. **Transformation:** women discuss and discover ways to break the cycle of oppression by changing the way we relate to ourselves and to others.
5. **Maintenance:** develop and use strategies to support continued health for ourselves, our families and our communities.

Self-Help groups provide opportunities for networking, resource building and nurturing. SisterSong was founded on the principles of self-help. Loretta Ross, Center for Human Rights Education emphasized, "From the beginning everybody had to agree to use the self-help process to be part of the Sister Song Collective.

We think self-help is fundamental because it describes the way we need to work together in a healthy way and not act out our internalized oppressions on each other. Women of color learn from other women of color how to be with

Self-Help (Continued)

each other based on the rich legacy of the National Black Women's Health Project." Luz Alvarez, National Latina Health organization agreed, "Self-Help was adopted back in the beginning. It is very clear to me that we have adopted self-help because we want to organize in a healthy and specific way. We have a process where we can really work things out with each other. If women don't commit to a process of what to do when things get hard, they walk away. I didn't want to do another collective without making sure that we adopted a process on how to work with each other."

Participants will be asked to participate in self-help dyads during the conference and the quality of listening each of us does will determine the effectiveness of our time together. In normal conversations we usually listen casually, jumping in to offer our comments or experiences whenever we think of something to say. The listening you are encouraged to do here is different. The idea is to listen

in order to assist the person who is talking. People rarely have a chance to examine their thoughts and to experience them at their own pace. The self-help dyads are set up to give each woman the precious time to think and feel in the company of other women. The listening process provides a chance for women to develop trust in their own thoughts and feelings. Show that you are listening by giving the person that is speaking your complete and undivided, loving attention.

Laughing, trembling, perspiration, yawns, crying and fast-talking are physical signs that a natural healing process is at work. This leads to clearer thinking and an ability to solve one's problem. If you notice that you are uncomfortable with another member's expression of her feelings, you may process your response during your time. It is important to protect each speaker from interruptions, interpretations and judgment.

"Self-help is hard sometimes for women to embrace because intimacy among some women/cultures is not that routine," says Loretta Ross. But we gently encourage your participation when you are invited to do so. Human beings are self-healing and self-help supports our growth, not our mutual destruction. "In order to create social justice, we have to first start with ourselves," says Luz Alvarez Martinez. "Social change is inevitable in that framework. If we want to make our communities healthy we have to be healthy ourselves". To our reproductive health and wellness! Peace.

By Lisa Diane White. Ms White has been a self-helper and trainer for 15 years, lovingly trained and nurtured by the sisters and sister spirits that passed through the National Black Women's Health Project and the feminist and women's' health movement.

Day's Highlights: Thursday, November 13th

CONFERENCE OPENING :: 9:00 a.m. :: Georgia Ballroom

- SisterSong Awards & Tribute Ceremony
- Byllye Avery ~ Founder National Black Women's Health Project
Featured Speaker: "Why Women of Color Must Organize on Reproductive Health"
- Self-Help Dyads ~ Facilitated by Luz Alvarez Martinez ~ Co-Founder/Executive Director National Latina Health Organization

PLENARY PANEL 1: BUILDING A NATIONAL WOMEN OF COLOR MOVEMENT :: 11:00 a.m. :: Georgia Ballroom

- Participant's Issues Survey

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!!! A main goal of this conference is to strengthen the national women of color movement focused on reproductive health and sexual rights. Towards this end, SisterSong would like to hear from all participants at this conference so that we can develop a policy agenda that reflects ALL OUR VOICES. In your packets, you will find the **Survey for the National Women of Color Health Conference** (printed on purple paper). Please remember to complete the survey and return it to the SisterSong registration table no later than Saturday, November 15th at Noon. The results from this survey will be compiled and shared at the closing on Sunday. THANK YOU!!

ETHNIC CAUCUS MEETINGS :: 3:15 p.m. :: Note Locations Below

Since its inception, SisterSong has honored the diversity of its individual members by creating space for women who identify with each of four ethnic communities -Indigenous/Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latina/Hispanic, and African American/ African - to meet in order to identify and strategize around issues of particular concern to them.

Day's Highlights (Continued)

ETHNIC CAUCUS MEETINGS (Continued)

Following this tradition, space and time will be dedicated for conference participants to meet in Ethnic Caucuses Today from 3:15 PM – 4:30 PM as follows :

Indigenous/Native American ~ Buckhead Room
Latina/Hispanic ~ Peachtree Room

Asian/Pacific Islander ~ Lenox Room
African American/African ~ Georgia Ballroom

PLENARY PANEL 4: ENVISIONING REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

:: 7:30 p.m. :: Georgia Ballroom

Barbara Smith, Co-Founder, Kitchen Table Women of Color Press

Barbara Smith is her own person as an independent scholar and author who has broken the ground for opening the national cultural and political dialogue about race, class, sexuality and gender.

Smith who is the co-founder of the "Kitchen Table Women of Color Press" is the featured evening speaker on Thursday, November 13. She will discuss a brief history of women of color organizing on reproductive rights.

"The near nonexistence of Black lesbian literature which other Black lesbians and I so deeply feel has everything to do with the politics of our lives, the total suppression of identify that all Black women, lesbians or not," Smith said. "This literary silence is again intensified by the unavailability of an autonomous Black feminist movement through which we could fight our oppression and also begin to name ourselves."

Smith was among the first to define an African American women's literary tradition and to build Black women's studies and Black feminism in the United States. She offers a consistently fresh approach to discussing complex social problems, especially racism and other types of bigotry.

TALKING CIRCLES :: 9:00 p.m. :: Note Locations Below

SisterSong recognizes that some participants at this conference may identify with other communities of affinity besides the primary ethnic communities originally identified by SisterSong OR they may want to meet about particular issues of concern to them. To facilitate opportunities for conference participants to meet with others who share a common affinity or interest, space and time will be provided this evening from 9:00 PM – 10:00 PM for gatherings of the following:

Queers ~ Peachtree Room
Reparations ~ Lenox Room

Young Women ~ Roswell Room
Indigenous Women's Issues ~ Buckhead Room

The SisterSong Collective Our History, Our Work

AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE:

SisterSong Videotape : Purchase a copy of the video that tells the story of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective's member organizations and work (2001). \$20

Post Conference Report: Available on CD-ROM after January 1, 2004.

To Reserve A Copy of the SisterSong Videotape and the Post Conference Report CD-ROM
E-mail info@sistersong.net

Announcements:

Correction to Conference Program:

Don't Miss This!! Elicia Gonzales was inadvertently omitted from the Conference program. She will be speaking on this evening's plenary with Barbara Smith - Topic: Madonna & the Whore & Women's Sexuality.

Paparazzi Needed!!

We are asking a few conference participants to help us capture the many special moments of this conference. Disposable cameras will be distributed each day of the conference for this purpose. If interested, please pick up a camera at the registration table and return after you have completed the roll of film. Thank you!!!

Inspiration: *Until Today!*

Iyanla Vanzant - November 13, 2003

From "Until Today! Daily Devotions for Spiritual Growth and Peace of Mind"

The greatest service I can offer is...accepting the value and importance of who I am and where I am in life.

You are exactly who you are because who you are is important. Everything you are is valuable and important. You are important to yourself and to everyone else. If you were not exactly who you are, somebody very important would be missing from the experience of life.

You are exactly where you are because all that you have to give and receive is right where you are now. Where you are is valuable and important. Everything you know is needed right where you are. Everything you can do is do-able right where you are. If you were over there or over here, there would be a big void right where you are now.

You have gone through all that you have been through because of who you are. Because of what you needed to know. Everything you have done and been through is valuable and important. In order to be who you are, to know what you know, to be where you are in this moment, you needed to go through what you went through.

Who you are where you are, what you know gives you value. It either makes your life important or discounts the importance of your life. How much you believe in who you are, serve where you are and use what you know can make a very big difference in who you become, where you go and what you do when you get to the next place.

Until today, you may have resisted, ignored, denied or underestimated the importance and value of who you are, where you are and what you know. Just for today, don't do that!

Today I am devoted to accepting the value and importance of every aspect of my life as it is now!



Women of Color Reproductive
Health Collective

P.O. Box 311020
Atlanta, Georgia 31131
404-344-9629

www.sistersong.net

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Documentation Team:

**Sararesa Begay
Kozetta Jane Harris
Lynn Hunter
Lisa Diane White
and**

Loretta J. Ross, SisterSong Conference Coordinator

Inquiries Should Be Directed To: info@sistersong.net