



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James Sanders Jr.

Sanders Celebrates Female Activists, Entrepreneurs and Community Leaders at Women's History Month Event

JAMES SANDERS JR. March 19, 2016



In recognition of Women's History Month, State Senator James Sanders Jr. (D-Rochdale Village) today held an event entitled "Women Making a Difference," where female community leaders shared their stories of success and inspiration along with tips on how to achieve one's full potential. The event was held at the Greater Rescue Church of Christ in Jamaica.

"I am proud to bring before you some dynamic folk who have broken the rules," Sanders said.

“The rules say that women will always be the mules of the world. Break the rules. Do not accept this madness. Any game that is fixed and says you’ve got to lose, don’t play it. Men can learn a lot from women.”

The keynote speaker was Erica Ford, Founder & CEO of LIFE Camp, Inc., an organization that provides educational, employment and social opportunities for at-risk inner city youth, with the goal of keeping them in school and out of the criminal justice system. She began her presentation at the event by asking the attendees to pause, close their eyes and breathe for a moment of meditation. It proved to be a difficult task for some, which Ford said illustrated her point that women experience a lot of stress because they are burdened with many responsibilities.

“Our mind is constantly running, as women, as providers, as the foundation for so many things, and people, and organizations, our mind is always running,” Ford said. “How can we be present for everyone else, if we can’t be present for ourselves? Sometimes it’s important to just be still and breathe, and be present for right now, free from all of the stress and anxiety of every single thing that will still be there after you breathe.”

Ford, who grew up in Jamaica, Queens during the 1980s when crack use and gun violence were an everyday occurrence, has dedicated her life to affecting change and ending the oppression faced by the African-American community. She was inspired after attending a rally at age 18, held by the December 12th movement, an international human rights group.

“I knew that I would change the world, and then I realized it was a long and tenuous journey to make that a reality,” Ford said. “As I took steps in that process, I became what Deepak Chopra refers to as an angry peacemaker.”

Ford said her initial attempts to affect change were hindered by her forceful approach, a style that was fueled by a distrust and resentment of those in power such as elected officials.

"Every elected official didn't do their job," Ford recalled of her philosophy. "Every elected official deserved my fist, my foot, whatever I had to chop them down. I might have been coming in the door with some great information that could have saved the community, but since I blew the door down, they were unable to get my message. So had I to convert my approach from seeing others as the problem to doing what I believed was correct."

Ford explained that many people come from a place of comparison and jealousy, where they judge those around them instead of being compassionate and interconnected. This way of thinking causes barriers, she added, and prevents individuals from viewing others as equals.

"If you spend your whole life worrying about something that you can't control, then you get depressed and you get angry. You start to judge yourself and ask why this or why that, instead of realizing that you are already great because you are you. You can never be that next person or that next group. You can only stand in the space, and the glory, and the divine purpose that you have been given as a man or a woman on this earth. When we try to embark on someone else's life and someone else's purpose, we fail automatically."

Also providing words of wisdom at the event was local entrepreneur, Nancy Martinez, a longtime resident of the Rockaways. After buying a home in 2008, she set her sights on opening a business and was determined that it be located in the community where she lived.

"Where there's a will, there's a way," Martinez said. "God has a purpose for you. You just need to keep going and show that you can do it."

In 2011, she became the owner/operator of New York Career Training School LLC, which teaches students (in four different languages) how to become home health aides, nurse's aides and personal care aides, assisting in rehabilitating aged and disabled individuals within the confines of their residences.

Martinez started the school with an investment of \$60,000 and now it generates over \$1 million annually. Over the four years since it was created, the school has trained 9,365 students and 98% of them have found employment. She is presently working on starting two more corporations in the Rockaways – NY Home Care Agency LLC and Community Action Response Emergency (CARE) Unit 911.

Transformation was the theme embraced by another speaker at the women's event. Months after thinking about creating a mentoring program and combining that goal with the symbolism of a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly, Dianna Blount founded Beautiful Butterfly, Inc., an organization which serves to inspire a diverse community of young girls and women to set and accomplish daring goals. The program focuses on five key areas – spirituality, health, finance, education, community service and activism.

“We need to shape our future leaders,” Blount said. “We tell our butterflies that they are beautiful and capable and that we believe in them, even when they don't believe in themselves.”

In closing the event, the attendees were asked to participate in an exercise where they compared and contrasted newspaper articles which detailed corporate social responsibility versus community and individual volunteerism. The goal was to help them understand the value and necessity of both. It was administered by Rhonda Binda, the executive director of the Jamaica Business Improvement District, who was joined by Janna Paschal, an associate

with Dewey Square Group, a public affairs firm.

Overseeing the day's activities as the Mistress of Ceremonies was Silaka Cox, a community activist and Chief Operations Officer with the Rockaway Youth Task Force. She is also the youngest serving member of Community Board 14 and is currently studying public affairs at Baruch College.

Senator Sanders presented certificates of recognition to several community members in attendance at the event, including Cox, highlighting their service, advocacy and leadership.

We would like to thank Pa-Nash Restaurant and Lounge, the South East Queens Chamber of Commerce and R.C.L. Enterprises for sponsoring the event, and Greater Rescue Church of Christ for allowing us to use their space.