

BUILDING BRIDGES

Urban League program seeks to foster better understanding among racial groups

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

"I left my family crying, hoping to find a new life. I am disappointed because I only find discrimination."

Those are the words of Mexico-born Yesica Abarca, who came to the United States as a teenager. Abarca, now 26 and a mother of three, shared several poems she has penned about her experience as an American immigrant Tuesday, during the late morning session of Bridging the Gaps in Racial Relations, a diversity training seminar the Urban League offers in conjunction with Forsyth County several times a year.

The Bridging the Gaps program, which has been in existence for more than a decade, is geared toward county employees, but open to the general public. Over a two-day period, participants hear from speakers and share experiences from their own lives in hopes of gaining a greater understanding of those around them.

Library Assistant Amy Jarvis said her four children were the motivation for her to take part in Bridging the Gaps.

"I'm always trying to teach them to accept everybody, and I thought this would be a good way for me to be more knowledgeable," she related. "I consider myself to be pretty open minded, but there's always new things to learn about other



Pauline Morris

people and about yourself." Bill Bailey, director of Programming for the Urban League, has led the sessions, along with consultant and motivational speaker Ralph Mitchell, for the past four years.

"Some people don't want to change, but oftentimes, people are here because they know they have these issues and they're looking for tools to change," Bailey explained.

The program, which drew roughly 15 people this session, has seen its share of success stories, he added. Facilitators push participants beyond their comfort zones, in hopes of fostering personal growth through honest dialogue and introspective assessment, he said.

Those present at the 11 a.m. session were forced to re-evaluate their own perceptions of the world right from the start.

"I always like saying this. Let me introduce you to an African American," Mitchell said, gesturing to a fair haired Caucasian woman standing



Bill Bailey

beside him. "Do you believe me?"

Pauline Morris, the speaker for the session, is a native of Africa. But she has long ago realized that people in America are not accustomed to viewing her as an African.

"People look at me and they think I think like a white person," related Morris, who works at the International Center at Forsyth Technical Community College, "but because I'm not from here, I really don't."

Putting a human face on the issues, like those of Morris, Abarca, and Evelyn Joseph, a Haitian national who also spoke, is one of the chief aims of the program, Bailey said.

"It's life changing," he said of Bridging the Gaps. "A lot of people come in here with baggage. Just because you're black doesn't mean you don't have prejudices."

Community member Thomas Burton was undaunted by the faces of the young women before him. He voiced his concerns about the influx

of Hispanics in the area anyway.

"A lot of the jobs are gone because of Hispanics," he said. "That's why the unemployment rate for African (Americans) and whites is so high."

While some in the group bristled at Burton's assessment of the problem, Bailey said allowing input from divergent parties is all part of the process.

"We welcome the honesty. We get raw," he said.

Although those present are encouraged to share their views, whatever they may be, Bailey says the group is careful to offer facts and hard evidence that may dissuade some of the uninformed opinions people have.

Angel Shoats found the training so helpful when she took it in 2004 that she decided to come back for another dose.

"I'm always trying to help other people; I'm always trying to give back in different ways," said Shoats, who serves as a clerical worker in the Department of Public Health. "It's a lot of different cultures out there, and I'm just trying to better understand them so I can speak to them in a better way."

The Urban League offers specialized diversity training for area businesses as well. For more information, contact Bailey, at (336) 725-5614.



Photos by Layla Farmer

Evelyn Joseph tells her story.

Films

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2007 film that takes place in the future as a crippled world stumbles toward economic ruin directed by Matt Frink, who graduated with a BFA in directing in 2008.

On June 20, "B is For Beekeeper," a 2007 documentary about North Carolina beekeeper Bill Waddell directed by UNCSA alumnus Thomas O'Keefe, will be screened, along with the documentary, "The Sheriff."

The 2007 film tells the story of Eugene Alexander, an albino African-American from the mountains of North Carolina. Alexander was 70 when the documentary was shot. The film shows him at work at Winston-Salem-based Industries For The Blind in North Carolina, where he helps visually impaired individuals manufacture mattresses that are



Photo courtesy of Jeff Giordano

Eugene Alexander with Director Jeff Giordano.

sold to North Carolina colleges, prisons, and the United States military. Alexander's spirituality and encounters with death are

also detailed in the film.

Jeff Giordano directed "The Sheriff." The Williamstown, N.J., native says the film has a special

place in his heart.

"The Sheriff" is a personal film for me because, like Eugene Alexander, I too have dealt with family tragedy at a young age," Giordano, who earned a directing degree in 2007, states on his Web site. "The goal of 'The Sheriff' is to inspire all human beings to overcome life's physical and emotional hardships and hopefully, find one's place in the world."

Giordano says that he is currently developing "The Sheriff" into a feature-length documentary.

On June 27, "The Golf War" will air. The film is about a boy who falsely believes that his soldier father is going to play "golf" instead of going to The Gulf (The Persian Gulf) to fight in a war. It is written and directed by Winston-Salem native Scott Kyger, who earned a directing degree in 2007.



PTA Photo

Cece Peniston with Matthew and Tina Knowles, parents of Beyonce and Solange, at a recent PTA gala.

PTA

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Reflections Gallery opening in February.

The PTA's message of parent involvement and student success is captured in the song's chorus:

"We are the shoulders you can stand on, when you reach for something higher. These are the arms that

you can count on, when your dreams have been delayed.

We are the parents, we are the teachers, you are the eagles that fly above horizons. Young conqueror; You're never alone."

"Above Horizons" cost \$1 per download, or three re-mixes of the song are available for \$2.25. Ringtones of each mix are available for \$2.49.

NBTF

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McLaughlin is among the dedicated group of NBTF officials that have worked to bring the event to fruition for years. The group started under the tutelage of Hamlin and has continued his work, partly as a tribute to him and his vision. Monday at the downtown Marriott, they took turns announcing highlights of the 2009 NBTF - which will be from Aug. 3 - 8 - at the traditional kick-off news conference. That task was a one-man show when Hamlin was alive. He'd take to the podium decked from head to toe in purple - Hamlin's and the NBTF's signature color - and work the crowd into a frenzy by merely describing what the upcoming festival would offer.

His team did its best to bring some of that razzle-dazzle. Hamlin's widow, Sylvia Sprinkle Hamlin, and his mother, Annie Hamlin Johnson, took part in a skit that spotlighted some of the 40 productions that will be staged during the upcoming festival. They include some returning favorites like "Black Man Rising," which was especially popular with ladies in 2007 because of its cast of well-developed actors; and the "Miles Long and Friends Experience," which will feature the musical stylings of former Cosby kid Malcolm-Jamal Warner.

Other notable performers are also slated to bring productions to this year's event. Kim Wayans of the well-known comedy family will star in "A Handsome Woman Retreats;" Wendy Raquel



Photos by Kevin Walker

Lawrence Evans, Annie Hamlin Johnson, Mabel Robinson and Sylvia Sprinkle Hamlin announce festival highlights.

Robinson, one of the celebrity co-chairs of the 2009 NBTF, will be seen in "Extremities," alongside "Moesha" actor Dorian Wilson; John Amos and Ella Joyce will bring shows as well. Among the new offerings this year is a series dedicated to the memory of Hamlin that will feature several one-person plays about historical figures.

"I want our community to come out and support this festival like never before," said Mayor Allen Joines, who was joined at Monday's event by Mayor Pro Tempore Vivian Burke, a longtime, ardent NBTF supporter.

Burke said the festival has earned the right to be supported by corporate and public dollars and by the public - those of all races and backgrounds.

"It can't be denied that Larry Leon Hamlin helped to put this city on the map around the world," said

Burke, who added that the millions in revenue the event brings to the city is reason enough to support and embrace it.

"The end results makes the cash registers jingle, jingle, jingle," she said.

Ted Lange, best known for his role on "The Love Boat," will be this year's other celebrity co-chair. He was on hand for Monday's rollout. (Robinson was filming and unable to attend). Lange said he attended his first festival nearly 20 years ago and has been hooked ever since.

"I fell in love with Winston-Salem because it was all about theater," he said.

Lange - who is a giant in the world of black theater having won awards writing and directing several plays - said the fact that the festival draws black talent from around the country and world is its drawing card.

"If you can't get to New

York, if you can't get to L.A., it all comes here," he said.

Soap opera stars Kim Brockington, who will bring her one-woman show about Zora Neale Hurston to the festival; and Nathan Purdee joined Lange in singing the NBTF's praises. Purdee, who stars on "One Life to Live," even credits the 2005 event for steering his now 17-year-old son into the acting profession.

This is a landmark year for the NBTF and the N.C. Black Repertory Co., which Hamlin also founded. This is the Theatre Festival's 20th anniversary and the Black Rep's 30th anniversary. Organizers have billed this as the 30/20 Vision year.

By next week, a full list of productions, information about volunteer opportunities and tickets for shows will all be available online at www.nbtf.org.

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