

Black lesbians and gays weaving the future

African-American lesbians and gays come together for annual conference. Highlights include a 92-year-old lesbian attending her first black gay conference, and Linda Villarosa, a senior editor at Essence magazine, brought her mom.

by Sidney Brinkley

At the very beginning of his welcoming address at the opening plenary of the Fifth Annual National Black Gay and Lesbian Conference last weekend, Phil Wilson, co-chair for the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum (BGLLF), took time out to thank God.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but in the last 10 days I have discovered there is a God, and she is on our side."

He was referring to a host of problems that had turned the conference into a last-minute logistical nightmare for the Leadership Forum and for Unity,

PHOTO BY MARC GELLER



Ruth Ellis

the Oakland-based organization which hosted the event.

Nevertheless, as the conference wound down to its final hours two days later, many of the participants appeared to agree that they had experienced an empowering, affirming, and generally successful black gay conference. Nearly 600 black gay men and lesbians from the U.S., Canada and England attended the event, which ran Feb.

13-17.

Among the diverse groups, which appeared to be evenly divided between male and female, were a number of nationally known political leaders and cultural figures, including Dr. Majorie Hill, liaison to the Gay Community for New York City Mayor David Dinkins; poet and author Jewell Gomez; Seattle's Hon. Sherrie Harris, the first black openly lesbian elected official; Reggie Williams of the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention; and poet Assoto Saint. The unofficial guest of honor was Ruth Ellis, a remarkable 92-year-old black lesbian from Detroit, Mich., attending her first black gay conference.

The conference was preceded by two days of institutes, including a daylong "AIDS Institute" hosted by Reggie Williams which featured New York City Mental Health Commissioner Dr. Billy E. Jones as keynote speaker. A "Women's Institute" was hosted by ACHÉ, a group of black lesbians from the Bay area.

While the stated theme of the conference was "Black Lesbians and Gays Weaving the Future," little if anything was offered to support that title. More apparent as a theme was the relationships black gay men and lesbians have with their parents and/or children. The emphasis on family was due in large part to the presence of Clara Villarosa, mother of Linda Villarosa, a senior editor at *Essence* magazine. Linda Villarosa publicly came out as a lesbian in an article she and her mother co-wrote for the 21st anniversary of *Essence* last May. Since her public disclosure, she has been in demand as a speaker at gay events. She and her mother were on hand to deliver the keynote address at the opening plenary.

While approximately 300 people gathered outside the room they were to use for their speech, they talked with a reporter about being thrust into the public spotlight.

"I had told friends about my daughter's sexual preference and wasn't hiding it at that point," she said. "But I realized it was a coming out for me because five million people had an opportunity to read it. Then I started getting phone calls and letters from people all over the country wanting to tell me their stories. Neither of us anticipated this response."

Both say overall the response has been overwhelmingly positive. However, Linda Villarosa says there was one incident with an acquaintance



Clara Villarosa and her daughter Linda

PHOTO BY MARC GELLER

that changed her perception of what she had done.

"I had a small conflict with someone who worked at my office. We had been on good terms before the article came out; then she changed. As it turned out, her family was giving her a hard time because she had appeared in a photograph with me. She later apologized, but it showed me how naive I was. I was thinking, 'Everything's fine, everything's great. I'm this out lesbian and have had no backlash.' That incident put me back in the real world. There are still people out there who are homophobic and who can be very nasty."

The following day, the Villarosas were joined in a workshop by Phil Wilson's parents. Titled "Mothers and Daughters, Fathers and Sons," the workshop dealt with issues around coming out to one's parents. The response to that workshop and to the Villarosa's speech prompted the Leadership Forum to plan a "Parent's Institute" for next year's conference which Clara Villarosa will host.

The 47 other workshops included "Understanding Sexual Minority Youth," ACT UP and AIDS Activism Among People of Color, "Androgyny and Femininity," and "Battery and Sexual Assault in the Lesbian Community." In addition, there were a number of cultural and social events.

Among those honored at the conference's awards banquet were Alan Bell and Sandra Lowe. Bell, publisher of *BLK* magazine, received the Black Quill Award, which is given to a person who projects positive images about the black gay community. Lowe, a lawyer recently appointed director of the Office of Gay and Lesbian Concerns for New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, received the Mable Hampton Award, which is given to a lesbian who "demonstrates outstanding contributions to the lesbian community."

The keynote address at the closing plenary was delivered by Dr. Tim Moragne, president of the Association of Black Psychologists. Moragne gave an emotional account of his reaction to his cousin's death from AIDS, a death that was the catalyst for his own coming out. He also spoke of his anger at the attempt by some members of his Association to block him from becoming president.

"It all comes down to three words for me," he said. "Those three words are 'how dare they.' How dare they try to deny any of us a position for which we are qualified because of their prejudice?"

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