

"Rebuilding A Community And Reliving A Dream"
By Imani McCalla



Following years of civil unrest within black communities, Manhattanville College and staff joined Westchester Martin Luther King Jr. Institute for Nonviolence in their 17th annual Ending Violence, Building Hope community gathering this month to discuss tools for positive change.

Inspired by Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement, the organization, since 1987, facilitates nonviolent action for social justice and promotes nonviolence as a way of life.

"The world is in your hands but we need to do more to make that possible," said Executive Director Reverend Doris Dalton. She encouraged students and staff to receive training on what to do when they are afraid in everyday situations. "The reason why we are doing this is because I strongly believe that Westchester County can come together and create what Dr. King called a beloved community--where we all see ourselves as people rather than color."

Dalton then introduced Adjunct Professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and retired NYPD police officer Sophine Charles to give tools on what to do when you are afraid, especially in police encounters.

"There is a difference between what you want and what someone else wants for you for your best interest," Charles began her first presentation, "Turning Fear into Courage." "Ten to 15 years later, you will see why they motivated you to do these things," she said.

"Some of us don't want to admit it, but we all have something to fear; I'm afraid everyday." Charles mentioned her 16-year-old son who attends school in Harlem. "I'm afraid that he'll have a negative encounter with a police officer because that is a reality."

Other than anxiety and other unpleasant emotions that constitute fear, Charles taught the audience that fear can also be encouraging.

"Fear creates privilege," said Johnny, a young man in the audience. Charles responded that fear can motivate us for success and referred to the adults, "We must be courageous to lead our youth to the right path."

Charles, who grew up in the police department, mentioned that she was injured by an officer and stated, "fear can cause police officers to overreact, but it's not an excuse for them to injure someone or cause unjustified violence."

Charles also said that youth are afraid everyday and asked the audience to give examples of how youth react to fear.

"Kids may drop out of school because they feel they are not smart enough or don't have what it takes," said Dakota, another young man in the audience.

Charles then gave other examples such as bullying, committing crimes and withdrawing from activities. "They also do things to succeed," she continued.

"Trayvon Martin wanted to join the NBA. If he wasn't killed, he would've been somebody great today," Dakota added.

When discussing courage, Charles taught that courage is "acting morally and rightfully." She explained her statement by mentioning that youth are responsible for many protests in advancing civil rights and morality, like the Black Lives Matter movement.

Other actions that define courage, Charles said, are going to school everyday, identifying future dreams, goals and aspirations, being involved in community service, helping with siblings, choosing to walk away from conflict, and positive talking. She told the audience to affirm themselves even if they do not feel it. "People who say they are beautiful, worthy and capable look different and act different."

Lastly, Charles said courage is making a choice to confront fear and encouraged the youth to think and write about it. Also, the best thing to do when they are afraid is to talk to people who care about them.

In her second presentation, "Know Your Rights in a Police Encounter," Charles taught the youth four communications that should be shared with police, which are name, age, address and whether they can call their parents or guardians. For adults, they can ask if they can call their lawyer.

Charles also advised the audience to make eye contact and not make any sudden movements and get permission to show identification if they are driving.

Dwight, a man in the audience, informed everyone about the Legal Equalizer, or LegalEQ app available for Android, iOS, iPhone iPad and iPod users. This app immediately records video or audio of the interaction with an officer. When you press the stop button, a link to the copy of the interaction is sent to three emergency contacts. There is also an SOS panic button that sends a message to your contacts, alerting them that you have been pulled over. The message includes the timestamp and location.

A young man in the audience asked Charles if she had noticed an improvement in the situations that are being discussed. Charles said there is an improvement because police are on a high alert now and because of reportings on racism, they can no longer deny their wrongful actions. Departments are now making change on policies, supervising, trainings and other preventive measures.

In the next presentation, a music group demonstrated what Charles meant by thinking and writing about what courage is.

Lord Judah and H.I.P. H.O.P., which stands for Highly Intelligent People Healing Our Planet performed four songs- "Discipline," "Won't Change," "Dear Lord" and "Riot" from their new album, "Accountability."

"Accountability means holding yourself accountable by improving your behavior on a daily basis. It is changing the way you react to what you see," said Lord Judah, the manager of H.I.P. H.O.P. since 2006. "We are trying to promote social action through music."

For the "Wrap-up Session," Associate Professor of World Religions and African Studies at Manhattanville James Jones shared powerful quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. and explained why they are significant to not only the event, but everyday life.

"We don't remember that Dr. King is committed to everyone on the planet," said Jones. If you want to follow his footsteps, you must be serious about any injustice in the world." Jones connected this to two of King's quotes, "Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere" and "You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

Jones shared that his son Malik Jones was shot by police in 1997 in East Haven, Connecticut at a traffic stop. In response to his death, he called someone in the police department. "Do not

close ranks around people who are corrupted,” he referred to cops. He believes in bridging the gap between police and the community.

“What do you think Dr. King would think about this society and what would his message be to the world?” asked Lord Judah.

“I think it would be the same,” replied Jones. “Black Lives Matter. Never forget the bigger picture--a beloved community,” he maintained.

Jones also encouraged the audience to read two books that relate to the discussion- *Racial Healing* by Harlon Dalton and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

“What are suggestions or recommendations for people who want to be non-violent although violence is thrown upon them?” asked Police Reform Activist Kenneth Chamberlain Jr. Chamberlain also mentioned that his father, retired former Marine and 20-year veteran was killed by police in his home in White Plains. In October, he spoke about his death at Professor Emeritus of Sociology Dr. John Howard’s 10th annual lecture on law and society at Purchase College.

“Riots get your attention, but it devastates the community and takes another black life,” responds Jones.

Lastly, Jones encouraged the audience to watch the movie, *Long Walk Home* that also embodies Dr. King’s dream.

“I loved this event,” said Linda Bloch, 71, a private child social worker. “Before Black Lives Matter, this is the first time I have heard about parents having to teach their kids how to talk to police.”

Pamela Segura, 24, who works at an environmental justice non-profit organization in Southwest Yonkers said, “I really enjoyed it.” It is very validating when people have the same anger and concerns as you do.”

Sara Smith-Cell, 24, who works at the same organization said “the lecture on how to behave in police encounters was very interesting. I feel this type of education is very important and informative.”

“I loved the policewoman and the professor was a showstopper, said Gail Maltman, 68, a private nurse practitioner. I would like to take a class with him. The way they talked about their children was very courageous. I am very impressed.”