



## Women of Color Conference explores health, leadership

By Stephanie Tavares / STAFF WRITER

About 500 women made their way last week to the Cox Pavilion at UNLV for the first annual Women of Color Conference.

The daylong conference on Aug. 3 featured prominent speakers, networking opportunities and panels on a variety of subjects including wealth building, health, and leadership. It was meant to give women tools to get ahead and to foster cooperation among professional women in Southern Nevada.

The conference was the brainchild of MGM Mirage Vice President of Corporate Diversity Debra Nelson and the Latin, Urban, Asian and American Indian chambers of commerce. The group has spent more than a year organizing and raising funds for the maiden event.

Organizer Nelson called it a "tremendous effort."

That effort was not in vain. MGM Mirage, American Family Insurance and Nevada Power stepped up to sponsor the event while In Business Las Vegas sponsored the continental breakfast.

Women and men from across the ethnic spectrum attended the event. Attendees came from as far away as Florida.

"The women of color conference represents a historic collaboration among the four ethnic chambers of commerce," Nelson said. "The four of them have never come together in this manner before to serve our community. We know this conference touched a chord in our community, that there are some needs that the conference spoke to among women here. So we're just really proud of the result of what it was and what it could be."

Among the most popular events was a panel discussion on health, which was filled to near capacity in both morning sessions.

The health panel, titled "A healthy start: A holistic approach to minding your body and soul," featured: Terrie Williams, president of Terrie Williams and Associates and author of a new book on surviving depression; Tina Lewis, a McDonald's franchise co-owner, jewelry designer and a survivor of multiple battles with high-risk cancers; Erin West, the special projects coordinator for the Nevada Cancer Institute who is researching cancer in minority communities; and Mary Svare a dietician at Southern Hills hospital.

West discussed how minority women are more likely to die from cancer than other groups. She said this is primarily due to a lack of screening and late detection. There are also certain super-deadly cancers that show up more often in minority women and can only be successfully fought if caught early.

The panel agreed that many health problems faced by women of color are due to a propensity to overburden themselves and not take "me time" to really take care of their needs.

"I was trying to be too many things to too many people," Lewis said about her lifestyle before discovering her first cancer. "You have to have balance."

They also discussed the lives that could be saved if women would get their annual screenings for cancer and other health problems as well as self exams. About 80 percent of breast cancer, for example, is not found in mammograms, but in self exams, which they said many minority women do not do for fear of finding cancer.

"Early detection is the key to surviving — period," Lewis said.

The panel also addressed the problem of mental illness, especially depression, in minority communities. There is still a stigma in many cultures against seeking psychological help, which can lead women down a path to ruin and even an early death.

"Women of color are suffering from (depression) in great numbers," Williams said. "We're always giving to other people but we need to learn to put the oxygen mask on our own face first."

Williams is the author of a ground-breaking new book on depression in the black community, "Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting," which will land in stores this winter.

Williams said that many cases of depression go undiagnosed, leaving women with less fulfilling lives as they struggle through the ups and downs without help. She said that with medication and therapy she has learned to manage her depression and know what will trigger a spell.

Weight, and the health hazards that go along with not eating properly, was a big topic on the forum. Svare and panel moderator (and personal trainer) Patricia Norman did their best to dispel myths about eating. Among them were warnings to avoid fasting diets, which don't receive oversight and which can be seriously harmful.

They explained that fasting has not been proven to "purify" the body of harmful chemicals and serves mostly to send your body into "starvation mode" after which it uses all food to restore fat stores.

Svare encouraged women to seek out a dietician if they have a significant amount of weight to lose or have dietary issues such as diabetes or high blood pressure. She also said a dietician can help those who are currently healthy stay that way through diet education and determining what, if any, vitamin supplements they should be taking.

"Don't buy vitamins from the health supplement stores," Svare said. "If you end up taking too much of one thing, it can be toxic."

Other popular sessions included career building, education, leadership and a guide to relationships.

"Today is all about us," Nelson said at the opening of the event. "I invite you to be fully engaged, to make this mean as much as it can to you. We know that when a woman's life is improved, all aspects of life around her improve."

Other event highlights included a speech by Nevada first lady Dawn Gibbons, a rousing performance of the song "I'm Every Woman" by MGM Mirage Manager for Supplier Diversity Kenyatta Lewis, and a luncheon address on the power of diversity by IBM Vice President of Market Development Marilyn Johnson.