

Corning World / Sullivan Park ceremony closes Black History Month events

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Dr. Carole Boyce Davies of Cornell University addresses employees at Sullivan Park, encouraging women: 'Break the mold, lead the way.'

CORNING, N.Y. — Women have made big gains in political leadership in the 21st century, but more work is needed to expand their influence in the future, according to Dr. Carole Boyce Davies of Cornell University, who was the speaker at the closing ceremony of the Black History Month 2018 program in the Sullivan Park Auditorium.

Davies, a professor of English and Africana Studies, said when she teaches a course on black women in political leadership, students are inspired by the example of Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress in 1968, and in 1972, the first black candidate with a major party's nomination to run for president. Several women in Congress have said they were also inspired by Chisholm, Davies said.

"Chisholm wrote in her autobiography that she did not think she could win, so she was not even trying to win," Davies said. "She was just challenging the logic that a black woman could not run for president."

Davies highlighted other examples of black women in political leadership around the world, and noted that black women in America have consistently been politically and socially active, from the suffragist and civil rights movements to the more recent Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement. However, she said, "Women are seldom leaders of major political parties, which are instrumental in forming future political leaders and supporting them through the electoral process."



Dr. Funmi Atilola, Black History Month co-chair, and Dr. Carole Boyce Davies.

Davies concluded by pointing to Reshima Saujani, a New York City lawyer and politician, and the founder of the tech organization Girls Who Code, as someone who challenges the conventional wisdom about women in politics. In her book "Women Who Don't Wait In Line: Break the Mold, Lead the Way," Saujani said even in women's organizations, women are sometimes cautioned to take their time before aspiring to leadership.

"Saujani concludes that the old last century paradigm that urges women to go slower than men, be careful and cautious, to wait our turn, is a broken paradigm," Davies said. "We need to change that or women will never achieve full parity and equality in society."

Davies raised important issues for women interested in becoming leaders, said Claire Warren Ginnan, a member of the Black History Month committee and a senior process engineer/project leader.

"The references to historical figures like Chisholm are left out of history books in many schools," Claire said. "Our children need to learn more about these fearless figures who dared to be first. Children need to believe at the youngest age that there are no limits to what they can achieve, even if they have to be the first to do it."

Emmanuel Okpara, the president of Black Growth Council (BGC) employee resource group, one of the sponsors of the program, said Davies' lecture was very impactful, considering our current national discussion of men in positions of authority abusing their powers.



Dr. Ibraheem Muhammad, Black History Month co-chair.

"The lecture, which covered women in political leadership globally, highlighted female leaders in formal and informal roles during the anticolonial struggles, civil rights movement, and present day female political leaders," said Okpara, a senior engineer. "The talk emphasized that these leaders advanced the needs of their respective communities, nations and people. Finally, the lecture was a good transition to the celebration of Women's History Month (in March) in the United States."

The program theme for the month was "MLK 50 Years Later: Legacies of the Civil Rights Movement," tracing the 50 years from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968 to today, including the

presidency of Barack Obama.

At the opening ceremony on Feb. 5, retired Corning Research Fellow Carlton Truesdale talked about the progress blacks have made in the last 50 years and the challenges ahead. In addition, three employees shared their memories of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s.

There was also a Black History Month Quiz Bowl, a Jeopardy-style event that tested employees' knowledge of black history, and a showing of one episode of a six-part PBS documentary series, "The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross." The sixth episode, "A More Perfect Union," was shown because it reviewed history from 1968 to 2013, organizers said.

In addition to BGC, the Black History Month program is sponsored by three other groups: Black Technology Network (BTN), Society of Black Professionals (SBP), and Inclusion.



Above, Claire Warren Ginnan, Black History Month planning committee member, introduces Samite, a Ugandan-native musician, who performs below.



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