

Durham's 16th Women's Forum fights discrimination, celebrates persistence

By Katie Rice

Durham does not forget that March is Women's History Month. Every year, the city hosts a panel and invites local women to speak on the year's theme.

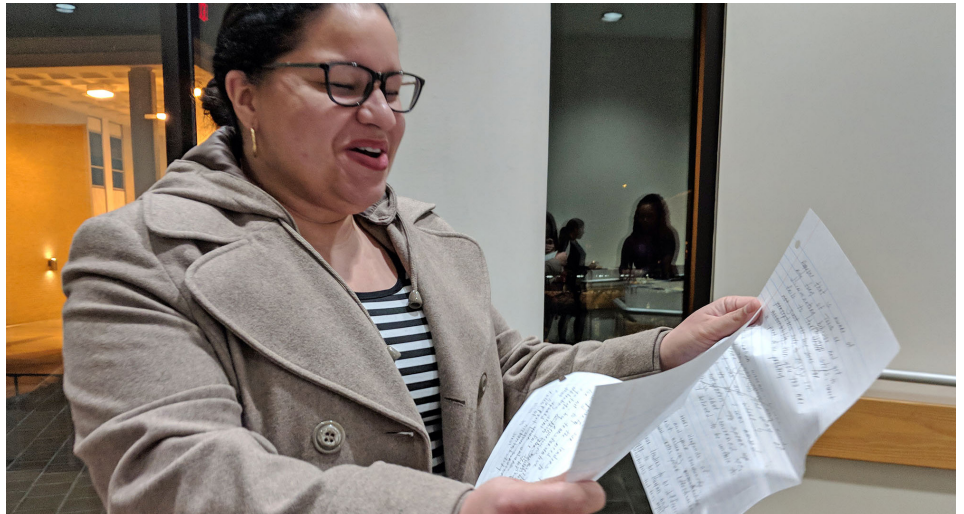
This year, the theme of Women's History Month is "Nevertheless, She Persisted: Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms of Discrimination Against Women." The theme comes from the National Women's History Project, and the Durham panel adopted the same theme.

The 16th annual Women's Forum convened in the Council Chambers of Durham City Hall on March 22. The forum ran from 6 to 8 p.m. and was followed by a catered meet-and-greet where attendees mingled with the panelists.

The forum was moderated by Hilda Gurdian, publisher and CEO of La Noticia, Inc. Gurdian posed questions to the three panelists: Wendy Jacobs, chair of the Durham Board of County Commissioners; Dana Mangum, executive director of the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence; and Dr. Yaba Blay, Dan Blue Endowed Chair in Political Science at North Carolina Central University.

The Human Relations Division of Durham's Neighborhood Improvement Services Department hosts the event, said James Davis Jr., human relations manager of the Human Relations Division. Attendance has grown over the years — in 2017, around 75 people attended the event. This year, the forum had 305 online RSVPs, and Davis said the Human Relations Division estimates 150 people attended.

The forum takes time and consideration to plan. Planning for this forum started last summer, and Davis already has two potential panelists in mind for next year's event. Panelists are selected based on their experience and their relevance to the theme of the National Women's History Month that year. Davis said the forum's planners consider the diversity of the panelists' racial backgrounds to represent the backgrounds of



Raquel Rosario spoke at the 2018 Women's Forum on the importance of women staying resilient and working together toward equality. Rosario said she was anxious about speaking in front of so many people but realized the message she wrote was too important for her to keep silent (Photo by Katie Rice).

Durham and the audience.

"Empowerment means making sure that everyone has an opportunity to voice their opinions or to maybe talk about challenges or overcoming barriers to equitable access to opportunities," Davis said.

At the beginning of the forum, each woman introduced herself and gave a short speech about her work. All of the panelists came from different backgrounds and each had a unique perspective to share: Jacobs shared her experiences as a woman in the male-dominated world of politics, Mangum talked about the societal issues that

underlie interpersonal violence and Blay spoke about celebrating black women for their contributions to civil and women's rights.

Though the panelists spoke on different issues, their speeches centered

on contemporary developments within the women's rights movement, including the #MeToo movement, which supports survivors of sexual harassment and assault, and GirlTrek, a movement motivating African American women and girls toward healthy lifestyles.

Overall, the message of the forum was hopeful and motivated women to work

together toward an equitable future. At the same time, the panel served as a reminder of the barriers against women that still exist.

"The implicit gender bias is indeed impacting us in unconscious, insidious and harmful ways," said Jacobs. "It is a powerful form of discrimination, and like racial bias, our unconscious or internalized gender bias has real consequences."

Raquel Rosario, who has attended the Women's Forum since 2008, came to the panel with a written statement on the importance of women staying resilient and working together toward equality. She was terrified of sharing her words with so many people, but her passion and personal experience encouraged her to speak out.

"What motivated me was the fact that I knew if I don't speak, nothing's going to change, she said. "I don't need to wait for someone else to be the first one."

Events like these are opportunities to effect change, and Rosario hopes her speech, along with the panelists' messages, encourages women to stop discriminating against one another and support each other instead. Women can use the shared experience of womanhood as common ground, she said.

"We have that one thing in common, and that should be more than enough for us to start conversation about the issues that are affecting us," Rosario said.

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James Davis Jr.