

Fabulous Me Conference Teaches Young Women To #FightLikeAGirl



Five-time world and international boxing champion and founder of the foundation El Saber Es Poder/Knowledge Is Power Mia St. John tells attendees they can overcome any obstacles they have in life.

“No matter what obstacles you have in life, you can overcome them.”

That was the message five-time world and international boxing champion Mia St. John gave to 220 girls ages 11 to 17 during the 2017 Fabulous Me: Celebration of Womanhood conference hosted by the Family Service Bureau of Newark, an affiliate of New Community Corporation.

St. John struggled with alcohol and drug addiction at a young age, overdosing at age 13. She also dealt with bullying and mental health issues including obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, general anxiety disorder and an eating disorder. Despite those difficulties, she graduated college and was a very successful boxer. The 49-year-old who has been sober for 28 years retired 11 months ago after a 20-year career with a win in New Zealand.

She experienced great tragedy in her adult life, however. “Two and a half years ago, my son committed suicide. And my son was also an addict and had schizophrenia,” she said.

To honor his memory, St. John started the foundation El Saber Es Poder/Knowledge Is Power to offer programs for addicts, the homeless and those suffering from mental illness.

Her daughter Paris St. John – a singer, songwriter and mental health advocate – also addressed the Fabulous Me attendees, telling them they don’t have to be perfect.

“What you really want is to accept yourself,” she said.

That message was a main theme of the seventh Fabulous Me event at Seton Hall University: #FightLikeAGirl.

“The goal for our 2017 Womanhood Conference is to promote, empower, teach and have girls understand the importance of growing up comfortable in today’s society,” said Family Service Bureau Executive Director Manuela Garcia. “Also at the same time learn the values of leadership, independence, creativity, prevention and learn additional skills to be a successful woman in today’s world and be able to #FightLikeAGirl.”

Girls not only attended the event but some participated in the planning and hosting as well. Junior Female Ambassadors, girls ages 15 and older that show leadership skills, are groomed to be the hosts of the event.

Rashidah Babb, 15, of Hillside High School has attended the Fabulous Me conference since she was 12 and was a Junior Female Ambassador (JFA) this year. Her takeaway from this event was, “To be yourself and love who you are.”

She plans to return again next year. “I love coming here,” she said. “It’s a good experience to make friends.”

Bringing girls together is another purpose of the conference.

“The idea behind this is to promote bonding of young females across socioeconomic class and race. There are a lot more similarities than differences,” said NCC Chief of Health and Human Services Arti Kakkar. “Fabulous Me brings 200-plus girls together under one roof to share ideas and learn leadership skills.”

Girls participated in breakout sessions that covered topics such as cyberbullying, STDs, teen pregnancy and domestic violence.

JFA Tameka Jackson-Bright, 15, of Newark Arts High School took a lot away from her first Fabulous Me conference, including using breathing techniques to calm down and not to let anyone control her.

“My favorite part was the boxer and the boxer’s daughter talking about expressing yourself,” she said.

To end the conference, members of Rutgers SCREAM Theater used improvisation to showcase dating

violence in various forms. Actors from the university performed a skit that included two couples in unhealthy relationships. The performance was interactive, with attendees asking questions to the actors while they were in character.

Organized by the Family Service Bureau, the Fabulous Me conference is funded by a grant from the New Jersey Governor's Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee, administered by the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission under the state Attorney General's Office. The conference is co-sponsored by the Department of Marriage and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University.



Singer, songwriter and mental health advocate Paris St. John tells the girls to accept themselves as they are.



Junior Female Ambassadors Tameka Jackson-Bright, left, and Rashidah Babb, both 15, welcome girls to the Fabulous Me conference.



New Community Extended Care Facility Administrator Veronica Onwunaka talks to young women about STDs and teen pregnancy.



Family Service Bureau of Newark Executive Director Manuela Garcia welcomes participants to the seventh annual Fabulous Me conference.