

Review of Black Women’s Firsts Panel Discussion held on March 7, 2020

Over 90 Connecticut Residents in Attendance

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Submitted: March 9, 2020



Black Women’s Firsts: Being Who They Are

From politicians to primary care physicians to public servants to preachers, it was no holds barred from the panelists participating in the *Black Women’s Firsts* panel discussion presented by [Urban Grants 4 Us](#) and hosted by the [New Haven Museum](#) in commemoration of Women’s History Month. Nothing was off limits as the women accepted the purpose of the task as outlined in my introductory remarks at this forum; which was to “celebrate and honor the panelists’ achievements” while “peeling away the layers to get a glimpse inside of who they really are.” The panelists, in turn, did not disappoint.

Ina Anderson, Esther Armmand, Alisa Bowens-Mercado, Diane X Brown, Babz Rawls-Ivy, Tamiko Jackson-McArthur and The Honorable Toni N. Harp candidly addressed moderator and organizer of the event, New Haven’s 1st and only black female Assistant Police Chief, Petisia Adger, as she strategically posed questions designed to create an environment of intimacy and conversation. It was more like a long overdue lunch date between close sisters and friends.



Left to right: Babz Rawls Ivy, Ina Anderson, Diane Brown, Hon. Toni Harp, Dr. Tamiko Jackson-McArthur, Esther Armmand & Alisa Bowens-Mercado. Photo Credit: Monique Cain

Delving right in, each speaker shared a bit of themselves when asked, “What is the one question that you wanted to be asked and no one has ever asked you?” To her own surprise, no one had ever asked well-known radio personality and spiritual advisor, Babz Rawls-Ivy, why she adopted four children. In a powerful commentary, Babz recounted a series of unimaginable traumatic events experienced throughout her childhood and offered that she wanted to provide love to children that would otherwise be void of such love during their own formative years. Babz further stated that because of her ordeal, she is able to recognize that her opportunities far exceed many others, and therefore, she needed to share those gifts bestowed upon her with others.

Touched by the openness of Babz’ response, Diane X. Brown revealed that she still carried the physical scars of domestic violence and yet, her greatest joy and accomplishment was her son born out of that relationship. Diane is a nationally recognized librarian, who molded Stetson Branch Library into a National Medal winner for Museum & Library Services. She uses her branch manager position to help shape policies, expose issues, and develop lives, people and communities.

Expectedly, professional trials were outlined by speaker after speaker. In Diane's case, her trial was the constant dismissal of her as a "real librarian" by patrons that frequented the downtown main library reference desk. In those instances, she would gladly refer the patron to other librarians as she was content in "knowing who I am and did not have the need to prove it to anyone else."

Dr. Tamiko Jackson-McArthur, acclaimed pediatrician and New Haven Board of Education member, related her experience when seeking employment in New Haven. Tamiko disclosed that, "I applied everywhere. No one would hire me...but my father, Milt Jackson, did not allow that." Milt Jackson traveled to St. Raphael's Hospital with Tamiko's resume in hand and made the hospital's administration hire the qualified Tamiko. Tamiko asserted that the unspoken rule was to hire in-house, "but they needed me." Consequently, she was hired by the hospital and because of her father's love and support, she's will always retain the use of her father's surname.

Esther Armmand, policy analyst, alder and president of Sojourner Truth Democratic Committee shared gems of wisdom and support from her strong, silent father. When a racial epithet was used to degrade Esther's father, he reminded her that, "it is not what people call you, it is what you answer to." Esther's mother, too, patiently guided her, never lecturing and always listening.

When the questioning shifted to the "lonely path women of stature take and the loss of friends because of success," the Honorable Mayor Toni Harp (who was met with a standing ovation when introduced as the first African American female mayor of New Haven, CT), related that her journey started as a ward member, ward secretary, alderwoman and then state senator. When she initially considered taking this journey, no one supported her, not even her husband. Toni, however, was not deterred and pronounced, "so what if no one sees you as you see yourself. Be who you are." Toni stepped out anyway, and with a big smile, facetiously declared, "and the rest is history."

Ina Anderson boldly proclaimed that when she saw that her firefighter brother had different hours from the usual 9-5, she wanted that job. Ina broke down doors and overcame obstacles to be the first and only black female firefighter in Bridgeport, CT in 1994; a department that had only 8 women when she joined. During the Q & A session, Tiffany Williams, a millennial audience member and Ina's daughter, pronounced in a question posed to the panelists that, "we are women first, then black women second." The overall audience objected lovingly to this characterization. Ina, however, responded in a good-humored manner, "Let me be clear. That is my child. I will do everything to defend her." Ina then expounded on her belief that God made different races and that being a woman is separate from that.

Representing the Generation X population, Alisa Bowen-Mercado delineated her life experiences and the unconventional twists she took. She started in her family's general contracting business; an industry dominated by males. Early on, Alisa let it be known that she wanted to work in construction and did so for 13 years. However, on a trip to Puerto Rico, she "saw people performing a dance called Salsa." Alisa took one lesson and soon thereafter opened her own school which is now celebrating its 20th year anniversary. Later, while at a beer festival, she noticed that there was an absence of black beer distributors. Upon research, she discovered that the brewing industry revenues were approximately \$114.2 billion a year. Needless to say, Alisa set out to start her own business, in yet, another male dominated industry. [Rhythm Brewing Co.](#) is now the 1st African American female operated brewery in CT and the 4th African American female operated brewery in the US. She opined that no matter how old you may be, "whatever you do, have passion for it."

The panelists' overall counsel to the attendees was to take the risk of confronting your fears head on, because when we don't face our own fears, we run the risk of self-sabotage.

This panel exchange evidenced not only that these women are multi-dimensional, Type A personalities, firsts and trailblazers in their respective fields, but represented who they are as individuals, as black women and as women. A part 2 of this event is certainly warranted.

Of note: Elder Janette Parker, former CT 95th District State Representative and widow of the CT State Treasurer, the late Hank Parker, was unable to attend due to illness but was warmly acknowledged.

Brief bios of all involved can be found online at [Urban Grants 4 Us](#). Guests were received by Urban Grants 4 Us volunteers, Ty-Zhayia Brown and Briana Williams, and the forum was hosted by Margaret Anne Tocharshewsky, Executive Director of the New Haven Museum.

A gracious thank you to all involved.

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