

AFRICA IN AMERICA

African communities in Brooklyn

CELEBRATING MOTHERS

Food, entertainment, gifts for all mothers plus more for 10 *Mothers of the Year* defined Dr Mathieu Eugene's annual *Mother's Day* celebration, at Erasmus High School in Brooklyn in 2009.

"Thank you for coming and giving me this opportunity to pay tribute to you, our mothers," Dr Eugene told them, "All you mothers are so precious that it's only fitting we take time to thank you for your sacrifices and for everything you've done not only for us but for our communities. Society couldn't be what it is today without you because, as we all know, if you want to get something done, get the mothers in on it!" Dr Eugene sits on the 51-member New York City Council, elected by District 40 in 200.

Councilmember Eugene, who was born in Haiti, described his pleasure at seeing humans from all over the world gathered to celebrate together. "That's what makes Brooklyn so beautiful," he declared. "New York is great because of its diversity, and you mothers with your different origins and religions, you are all wonderful. I love you all."

While everyone was eating, the Latin Fever Dancers performed. They concluded by jumping from stage to grab partners from the audience - including the councilmember himself, who danced the Salsa.

Additional performances by singers Claude Aurelien, Noel McDonald, Patrine Simone and Wilkerson Theodore were interspersed with solos on the musical saw by 80-year-old Moses Josiah and a violin solo by 9-year-old Claudius Agrippa. Dennis Rahiim Watson gave a motivational speech, and Grann Nana a comedy routine.

Upon entering, each mother had been given a raffle ticket. Later on, Mr James Richmond, the event's MC, announced a raffle drawing to select 10 representative Mothers of the Year to receive a lavish gift basket contributed by Princess Daley, along with a crown, corsage, balloon and a citation from Councilmember Eugene.

Once the raffle tickets were drawn and all the Mothers of the Year bedecked, they were each asked a question, giving them the opportunity to highlight their beliefs about motherhood.

In answer to a question about how a mother can help ensure her child's success in life, one mother said, "Be very active in your child's school. Know your child's teacher and the school principal, and volunteer at the school if possible." Another mother responded, "I teach my children to never give up and that anything they want to be they can be with God's help."



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Pictures from previous page and above: Mother's Day celebration begins with food; Latin Fever Dancers receive citation from Councilmember Mathieu Eugene MD; Moses Josiah performs "Ave Maria" on the musical saw as James Richmond holds microphone; Dr Eugene with the 10 representative Mothers of the Year; Dr Eugene gives Mrs Zeta Heron a citation in her home. Right, Claudius Agrippa's plays the violin: Bach's Gavotte in D major. Photos from Donna Lamb.

In answer to the inquiry, "What lessons have you learned from your own parents that you want to hand down to your children?" a mother answered, "Always respect yourself and respect others. If you want respect you have to earn respect and give respect."

Councilmember Eugene concluded the gala by thanking all the companies and individuals who had contributed to the event, especially Mark Dicus and Jack Katz of the Church Avenue and Flatbush Avenue BIDs respectively, Dr Kesler Dalmacy, Rabbi Pikus of COJO, Guychard Saint-Hilaire of Venus Restaurant, Balloons 'N' Things, and Linderman Florist and David Shannon Florist.

As the gala ended, Mrs Patricia Heron-Lawrence, told Councilmember Eugene that although she was thrilled to have been celebrated as a mother herself, she had not stopped thinking about her own mother, Mrs Zeta Heron, who has cancer. Mrs Heron-Lawrence asked Councilmember Eugene for a citation to bring home to her mother. "She is an amazing Mom," she said. "Even in her illness she still gives everything of herself to all her children. She's so special and we all love her very much."

Councilmember Eugene, a physician who does not practice in the United States, was so touched by Mrs Heron-Lawrence's story that he travelled to her home to celebrate Mrs Heron's mothering. Mrs Heron was born in Jamaica and is the mother of 6 children, 17 grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

He told her, "When your daughter spoke to me about you, I knew you had to be a wonderful mother to be loved that much. I wanted to come and thank you personally for what you've done for your children because when you raise your children right, you don't just do it for your own family; you do it for



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all society." Flanked by her husband Raymond and other members of her family on Mother's Day, Councilmember Eugene gave Mrs Heron her City Council citation declaring her "an outstanding citizen who is worthy of the esteem of both the community and the great City of New York."

BROOKLYN COMMUNITY HEALTH FAIR

"Community health fair" in New York City more than likely brings images to mind of arms wrapped uncomfortably tight for blood pressure tests, fingertips pricked for blood samples to check for diabetes, and an overwhelming amount of literature on medical issues most know they should pay more attention to but would really rather not think about.

But that does not describe the recent all-day health fair held by Councilmember Mathieu Eugene in partnership with Flatbush Beacon Project and Middle School 2 in Brooklyn. Yes, there were the things one would expect - tables laden with valuable information on health issues affecting everyone from infancy to old age and plenty of free screenings and other medical services available throughout the day - but there was an added bonus. The organizers also managed to make it fun!

For one thing, the event was held in the cheerfully lit, festooned Middle School 2 cafeteria. While attendees could make the rounds of the tables to pick up information and free gifts or obtain screenings and counseling, they could also take part in interactive presentations on such topics as the need for proper nutrition, conducted by the nutritionist Max Fleurival. The little ones had a great time guessing at answers and shouting out their responses as they learned about things like portion control and the harmful effects of too much sugar.

The CAMBA Anti-Stigma Squad sought to dispel HIV-related myths and promote prevention through the dramatization of real life situations that made it clear that anyone, male or female, gay or straight, who

has unprotected sex can put lives at risk. Teenagers listened attentively and then participated in a discussion of what they'd heard, giving hope that some information imparted will lengthen lives.

Kicking it all off was the MS2/Beacon Inspirational Dance Team that wowed the crowd with their performance, and, for the hungry, refreshments provided by the Flatbush Beacon Project.

Among the 18 participating providers were the New York University College of Dentistry with its Smiling Faces Going Places mobile van in which children received basic dental checkups; Kings County Hospital, which reached out to people about smoking cessation and also conducted asthma screenings in its van; the Children's Hospital at Montefiore which provided lead poisoning information; and the Community Healthcare Network and the Amethyst Women's Project, both administering the OraQuick HIV rapid test, which give results within 20 minutes.

When Councilmember Eugene took the microphone to express his thanks to the providers and to give everyone in attendance his warmest greetings, he said that as a trained physician (who has worked in his profession in Mexico and his native Haiti, but not in the United States), "I want to tell you that health is the most precious gift we can receive from God. Even if we have money, power or beauty, they count for little if we don't have our health. Therefore, I see it as a moral obligation for us elected officials to do everything we can to join with others in providing our constituents with access to quality health care."

On hand, too, were Andre Lake, vice president of the School of Professional and Community Development at Edgar Evers College, Middle School 2 Parent and Teacher Association President Mechelle Brunson, and the school principal Adrienne Spencer, who added her voice in thanking the participating organizations for making the event such a success. Spencer also told her young charges how happy she

Professionals at the Health Fair took blood pressure (Caribbean House Healthcare Center of the Community Healthcare Network), gave nutritional advice (Max Fleurival) and listened to Councilmember Mathieu Eugene MD urge participants to act on the advice given. Photos from Donna Lamb.



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was that they had turned out in large numbers for the fair. "You have heard President Obama talk about being productive," she told them. "The only way we can be productive is if we have healthy bodies and solid minds - our health and the brainpower to go with it. That's a wonderful combination with which to start life."

HEALTH SYMPOSIUM ON BREAST AND PROSTATE CANCER

Women over 40 need annual mammograms, and men over 45 need annual prostate examinations. Early detection and treatment of breast and prostate cancer can prolong lives. This and more information about breast and prostate cancer awareness, prevention and treatment was imparted to a gathering of hundreds at a Health Symposium, hosted by Councilmember Mathieu Eugene MD in conjunction with Maimonides Cancer Center and held at Public School 245 in Brooklyn.

Many had come from church, and in his welcoming comments Councilmember Eugene said that health is God's most precious gift, "With health everything is possible. Without health, nothing is possible. It doesn't matter how much money, power, or beauty you have. None of it matters when you don't have



your health." And he added that one of the most loving things a spouse can do is to make sure both get tested annually.

Councilmember Eugene introduced Ms Pamela Brier, President and CEO of Maimonides Medical Center, who said, "Breast cancer is not just a woman's issue, and prostate cancer is not just a man's issue." She recommended colon cancer screening because, like breast and colon cancer, "If you don't know you have it, it can get to you before you get it."

Dr Patrick Borgen, Director of the Brooklyn Breast Cancer Program at the Maimonides Cancer Center asked attendees to raise their hands if they ever or anyone they know has had a breast cancer health scare. Almost every hand went up. "Breast cancer is one of the largest health threats for women in America today," he said. "There are about a quarter of a million new cases each year. If a woman lives to the age of 85, her risk of getting breast cancer is about 1 in 10."

Dr Borgen told the women the importance of telling their doctors that instead of the x-ray, they want the digital mammogram. The picture is clearer and problems will be detected earlier. He also recommended that women with high rates of breast or ovarian cancer in their family should consider having gene testing to identify hereditary predisposition to cancer.

Dr Borgen explained that breast cancer is a family of diseases. The challenge is to match the breast cancer with the right specific treatment. The percentage of women who die from breast cancer is declining, going down 2% every year since 1990.

Dr Ridwan Shabsigh, Director of the Division of Urology at Maimonides Medical Center, spoke next, saying that, perhaps because of cultural attitudes, men are less likely than women to see a physician. Prostate cancer is more prevalent in men of African ancestry, and 250% more deadly.

Brooklyn has an especially high rate of prostate cancer among men of African ancestry, making it all the more urgent that they get tested. "Prostate cancer can be detected very early and easily by a simply digital rectal examination of the prostate for any lumps, bumps or nodules," said Dr Shabsigh. "If something is found early, it is highly treatable, and a man can live a long and healthy life."

Following the medical presentations, Councilmember Eugene led the lively question and answer session in English, Spanish and Creole.

Congressman Anthony Weiner, who serves on the Congressional Subcommittee on Health, thanked Councilmember Eugene and Maimonides Cancer Center "for offering guidance on what is, perhaps, not only the most important health issue of the

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moment but also our most important economic issue." He said that hopefully they would be rewriting the healthcare laws under President Obama, and, just like the panel, they're going to focus on doing it smart. "We want to make health care less expensive because it doesn't do us any good if people can't afford to get it," he concluded.

By Donna Lamb

Donna Lamb is a writer and antiracist activist in New York City. She can be contacted at dlamb@gjs.net.



Mathieu Eugene MD

Councilmember Dr Mathieu Eugene is the first Haitian-born official elected to New York City Council. He is also the first member to win by a large majority in 2 elections within 12 months.

In Brooklyn, Dr Eugene is a community leader, educator, health professional, local media personality and founder of the non-profit organization, YES (Youth Education and Sports).

Dr Eugene advocates for every person's right to access to quality affordable healthcare. He is a former member of the Community Board for In-patients at Maimonides Medical Center. As a City Councilmember, he continues to conduct annual health fairs, symposiums and other health-related events to address varied health issues and help some of the most medically underserved populations in the borough attain access to free screenings and other health services.

Dr Eugene is a member of Community Board 14 and a co-founder of the Committee for the Development of Northern Haiti, which provides support to immigrants in Brooklyn. He is also a former president of the Haitian Community of Holy Innocence Church. He previously hosted the "Youth and Family Empowerment" Cable TV Show on BCAT and now hosts "Community Connection and Empowerment" on the same TV station. He has appeared on television and radio shows and in newspapers serving the Caribbean community.

Dr Eugene attended College Notre Dame and later graduated from Regina Assumpta College in Haiti. He was awarded a medical degree from Universidad Del Norte Este in Mexico and was a member of the Aesclepius Medical Society.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Entered City Council: 05/09/2007

Current Term Expires: 12/31/2009

Represents: Kensington, Prospect-Lefferts, Ditmas Park; parts of Crown Heights, Flatbush, East Flatbush

Committees: Aging; Civil Rights; Environmental Protection; Fire & Criminal Justice Services; Immigration; Lower Manhattan Redevelopment

From New York City Council website.

Above left, Brooklyn near Flatbush Avenue, Councilman Eugene's offices. Brooklyn has a population of 2.5 million; it is one of 5 boroughs of New York City. Left, Haitian family stopped by Dr Eugene's office to visit. These children were in Dr Eugene's youth organization, including Colin, 11; Stacy, 9 and Lori, who is 6. Photos on this and previous page by MJOTA Publisher.