

THE 8TH ANNUAL ORLANDO WOMEN'S CONFERENCE STRENGTHENS SISTERHOOD IN WORK, LIFE, LEADERSHIP & PHILANTHROPY

by **Karen LeBlanc** | Photos by **Nancy Jo Brown, 106FOTO**

A 600-member strong sisterhood emerged from the 8th Annual Orlando Women's Conference whose collective energy intends to reverberate throughout Central Florida in the workplace and community. *Orange Appeal* magazine produces the annual conference, presented by Florida Hospital for Women, aimed at empowering and nurturing women leaders. The daylong event, held at Loews Sapphire Falls Resort, is a conversation-starter about timely issues including workplace rights, diversity and inclusion, leadership, philanthropy, entrepreneurial and career growth.



Christi Ashby welcomes guests to the conference.



Danya Shea's opening session kicks off the day.

Danya Shea, CEO and founder of Fervor Works and co-author of the forthcoming book, *The Empathy Framework*, opened the conference with a talk about organizational empathy. Her new book, co-authored with Byron Noel, outlines how to establish an "empathy framework" in corporate culture that "unlocks the heart of your customer and wins more market share." Shea shared her thoughts on how to rehumanize business and adopt this new marketing model, debunking the myth that empathy is an inherent trait rather than one that can be cultivated.

Empathy, inclusion and empowerment were overarching themes throughout the day's breakout sessions, tackling topics such as generational collaboration, the elusive quest for perfection, volunteerism and career changes.

The *Take Action* session moderated by Jill S. Schwartz, managing partner of Jill S. Schwartz & Associates, P.A., focused on women's rights in the workplace, including laws about sexual harassment, equal pay and maternity leave. She talked about how equal pay for men and women continues to be problematic. "54 years after passage of the Equal Pay Act, women earn 79 cents for every dollar men earn. Women with children suffer a mommy penalty and earn 3 percent less than women without children. Fathers with children earn 15 percent more because they are perceived as having to support a family," she said.

She advised women to have dialog about pay issues and to know the stats on their employer's pay scale. The panel also discussed maternity discrimination in the workplace and the maternal bias that can happen when women return to work. "Pregnancy discrimination still happens in the workplace," says Jill, who recounted instances of women demoted after announcing their pregnancies to their employers. She pointed out there are both economical and emotional damages available to women who suffer harassment or discrimination in the workplace. "If we pinch pockets, they will be afraid to do it

again," she says, referring to workplace perpetrators.

The Diversity and Inclusion breakout session moderated by Elisha Gonzalez Bonnewitz was well attended, not an empty seat in the audience as panelist Vernice Atkins-Bradley, licensed general contractor of Votum Construction, talked about the need for diversity in STEM careers (science, technology, engineering and math) and shared her struggles working in a male-dominated industry. "Through perseverance and belief in yourself, make the case that you belong," Vernice advised the audience. Panelist Eva Loosier, distribution engineering manager for Duke Energy, talked about the importance of the female perspective in the workplace.



Attorney Jill S. Schwartz (center) was joined by panelists Andrea Coudriet-Batchelor and Deloria Nelson Streete.



Vernice Atkins-Bradley discusses diversity in STEM careers.

“Women see the world differently and manage differently,” says Eva, who talked about her struggles initially trying to act like “one of the boys” to fit in at work only to discover her strength as a woman made her a company asset. “It’s okay to be feminine. You don’t have to be in the boys’ club. Women have something to offer that men do not,” Eva adds. Panelist Kelcia Mazana, an environmental project engineer, advised women to find a mentor in their career to uplift and educate.

In the breakout session *Jumping Off and Making the Leap*, panelists shared advice on starting a business or switching careers. Secily Wilson, a media communications professional, shared her story of reinvention after going through a divorce, then suffering a stroke. “Life happens and you have to be resilient. When life makes an unexpected turn, find what’s best in



The nine morning breakout sessions were all enthusiastically attended.

you to bring forth,” Secily said. After her stroke, Secily lost her voice and her job and at her lowest point in life, realized she needed to make a difference in someone else’s life. “When I gained my voice back, I decided to use it with intention,” she says.

Panelist Debbie Farah, CEO and founder of Bajalia International Group, advised those considering a career change to understand what they are willing to give up and to consider so-called “lifestyle businesses” as extra income generators. “There are seasons in your life when a lifestyle business is the way to go,” says Debbie, who calls herself “a social entrepreneur” in search of problems to solve in society. “All businesses will need a social mission in the next 15 years or they will cease to exist.” Panelist Dr. Deborah Harding, founder of the Harding Medical Institute, recommended to those considering career

changes that they know their strengths and tell people about them.

At lunch, Kimberly Bell, assistant vice president, Cardiovascular Institute at Florida Hospital, shared her top 10 tips for a healthy heart, noting that “80 percent of cardiovascular medical emergencies are stress related.” Kimberly started off her pep talk with a deep breathing exercise, teaching the audience how to lower their blood pressure in 10 breaths while “being fully present, here and now,” and asked the audience to text kind words to someone important; the act of sending love makes us feel good. Kimberly recounted how she lost 110 pounds less than a year ago by believing in herself and challenged everyone in the audience to do something healthy for themselves.

Dr. Romie Mushtaq, a neurologist and mindfulness teacher, then took the stage



Debbie Farah, Cathy Sterba, Dr. Deborah Harding and Secily Wilson give advice on changing careers.



Kimberly Bell shares her story and how she stays motivated to be healthy.



Dr. Romie Mushtaq explored the power and purpose of sisterhood in the luncheon keynote address.

with her message of female empowerment, saying she “stands strong in her stilettos” today because of her supportive friends she calls a sisterhood. “We are the sum of the five people around us; closest to us,” she revealed. She emphasized the importance of cultivating a female support network and asked audience members to practice female affirmation by saying to each other: “I see you. I hear you. I believe in you.” Dr. Mushtaq brings together brain science, integrative medicine and mindfulness in her practice and international speaking career. “Meditate: there is something your mind needs to hear, and your heart needs to feel,” she said. She encouraged the audience to make one key mind shift “to choose fear or choose love.”

Stylist Melanie Pace had the crowd

laughing with her vivacious, bubbly personality as she shared 10 easy steps to styling a work wardrobe starting with the white button-down shirt, as a foundation piece. Melanie and several models demonstrated examples of how to create a professional wardrobe, utilizing stores at The Mall at Millenia, and shared some fashion trend insights, including the return of the power suit and the popularity of the color lilac. Melanie expanded the audience’s sartorial vocabulary with her suggestions of wrap dresses, jumpers and high-waisted pants, some of the latest looks finished off with a pop of color.

The 2018 Orlando Women’s Conference is both a forum for important women’s and community issues and a marketplace where vendors share the latest products and services that enhance quality of life. Boutique-style shopping, health and wellness information and spa experiences were among the dozens of booths attendees perused between breakout sessions. Each left with a complimentary goodie bag filled with product samples, coupons and information including a \$25 certificate to participating stores at The Mall at Millenia.

Programming wrapped with *Orange Appeal Live!*, a special session in a talk-show format on stage, hosted by Annetta

Wilson, president of Annetta Wilson Media Training and Success Coaching. Guests included Dr. E. Ann McGee, president of Seminole State College; Kay Rawlins, vice president of community relations for Orlando City Soccer Club and president of the Orlando City Foundation; Barbara Poma, Pulse nightclub owner and executive director of the ONEPulse Foundation; and Christi Ashby, founder and publisher of *Orange Appeal* and *Interior Appeal* magazines.

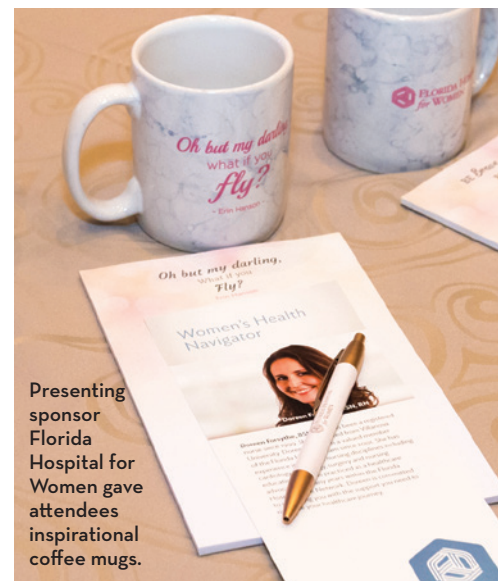
Before the day ended, guests had a last chance to connect and converse at a special reception sponsored by Duke Energy — appropriate as the energy was electric. Last-minute shopping and business card exchanges took place before the 2018 event concluded.

Florida Hospital for Women, the event’s presenting sponsor, gifted attendees with coffee mugs imprinted with provocative words including: “Oh but my darling, what if you fly?” These words became the conference rallying cry, encouraging women to dig deep and stand strong in their personal, professional and philanthropic endeavors.

The 2019 Orlando Women’s Conference is scheduled for Thursday, April 18. For periodic updates, visit orlandowomensconference.com.



The Mall at Millenia and stylist Melanie Pace (center) shared 10 tips for creating a work wardrobe.



Presenting sponsor Florida Hospital for Women gave attendees inspirational coffee mugs.

Orange Appeal Live!

As the last session of the successful 2018 Orlando Women's Conference, I was honored to participate with Ann McGee, Barbara Poma and Kay Rawlins as Annetta Wilson asked us about experiences that

empowered us and pivotal moments that shaped our lives. It turns out we had a lot in common.

None of us are afraid of change. We all seem to thrive on new and different situations, positions and ideas. As we discussed change, we all smiled and nodded that it was a good thing even when it's scary or unknown.

All of us had experienced being marginalized. Yes, things are evolving for women — very slowly. We all had learned to navigate male-dominated industries and organizations by being strategic and sacrificing short-term wins for long-term gains.

Passion powers us. We all found our greatest successes and fulfillment through work that truly moves us and inspires us. None of us works just for the money, or status, or title. We enjoy what we pursue and measure our success by our own standards.

Sisters sustain us. We can't have it all without recharging and relaxing. Good girlfriends are the ones who lift us up, soothe our stress, and let us exhale and laugh. We have all learned to let go of those who bring us tension and unease.

No is a complete sentence. Sometimes saying no is the best answer. It requires no explanation or hesitation. We are all givers and get asked a lot, but we know when to say no (I may still be working on this a bit).

— Christi Ashby



Orange Appeal Live! host Annetta Wilson (center) with Christi Ashby, Dr. E. Ann McGee, Kay Rawlins and Barbara Poma

Congratulations to Christi, Kate and Wendy
on your 10th anniversary!
We appreciate all you do for our community.



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