

Speaking for better black health

Claudia ZequeiraThe Orlando Sentinel, Fla.

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Jun. 15--Health was on everyone's mind Saturday as thousands gathered in Orlando for the annual 100 Black Men of America conference.

Held at Disney's Yacht & Beach Club Resorts, the five-day conference that ends today was focusing on health issues affecting the black community.

It included a Community Empowerment Project at Jones High School that featured free health screenings, a town-hall meeting on health topics and a healthy cook-off.

Here's what some at Saturday's community event had to say:

Rock Harper, chef at Terra Verde, a Green Valley Ranch Resort restaurant in Las Vegas:

Harper, who participated in the cook-off, said black people who enjoy food -- particularly Southern cooking -- should eat in moderation and try to find healthier modifications to familiar dishes.

"I love Southern food, but we have to make it a little healthy. We can't eat it all the time," said Harper, winner of Hell's Kitchen, a Fox television show in which cooks compete for a coveted chef's job.

"We have to use fresher products and watch for sodium . . . sometimes, with soul food, it can be as easy as taking the skin off the chicken."

Jonathan Woodson, brigadier general and commander of the 330th Medical Brigade, Fort Sheridan, Ill. and a professor and associate dean at Boston University School of Medicine:

Woodson, who hosted a panel on health topics, said big health disparities exist between blacks and their white counterparts, with much work needed to close that gap.

"We haven't seen much progress in the past 25 years," Woodson said. "We know that diabetes is increasing, that obesity is increasing, including cardiovascular disease . . . there are a lot of things that need to be done. What we need to do is galvanize people to make changes."

Wider access to health insurance, more blacks in the medical field and better habits, such as diet and exercise, are important, he said.

John Hammond, chief executive officer of 100 Black Men of America:

Hammond said his organization has gone beyond hosting the annual conference and, in the past few years, organized Community Empowerment Projects such as the one at Jones High.

"We don't want to just host a conference and generate economic activity," Hammond said. "We want to leave something substantial to the community after we leave."

Organizers said this year's conference was better attended than ever. Hammond estimated that about 1,000 neighborhood residents showed up at the community event in addition to the 1,600 adults and 500 youths who attended the full conference.

Dr. Rameck Hunt, a doctor of internal medicine and assistant professor of medicine at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. Hunt has co-authored several books with Dr. George Jenkins and Dr. Sampson Davis, including the best-seller *The Pact*:

"Our families still live in the 'hood," Hunt said. "So somebody has to [come out and educate the public]."

The Pact is an autobiographical tale of three young men who vowed to pursue higher education and followed through with their dreams, beating all odds.

"Our positive peer pressure is what allowed us to be where we are today," Hunt said. "We were our own little network. We were our own little fraternity."

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