

6/10:

## Conference connects everyone

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer

The ninth annual Parent Empowerment Conference that took place on the weekend at Park Avenue Elementary School had a little something for everybody of all ages who attended.

For the adults and parents who showed up to take advantage of the “empowerment” aspect of the event that was organized and carried out successfully by the Orange PTA/PTO/PTSA District Council, there were a bevy of seminars, workshops and informational sessions to attend. The highlight of the morning session was the keynote address that was delivered by Newark Tech Principal Baruti Kafele, a noted orator recognized for his emphasis on minority education and his dedication to helping black boys learn and prosper in spite of the institutional and negative social and cultural forces that have traditionally lined up against them.

The list of morning workshops included the State of the Orange Public Schools by Superintendent Ronald Lee; How to Cook and Eat to Live; Understanding Your Child’s Personality; Fathers Make A Difference; Raising Him Alone; Fixing Family Finances; Preparing for College; and Helping Children Do Well In School, which was conducted in Spanish by Theresa Ruiz, a RASP Consultant. In the afternoon session that followed a one hour lunch break, parents were presented with more workshops, such as another State of the Orange Public Schools by Lee; The Second Time Around — Helpful Hints for Grandparents Raising Children; Raising Girls in Troubled Times; Preparing for Vocational Careers; and Helping Children Do Well In School, that was presented in Creole by Martial Bonhomme, a certified social worker.

“We tried to have a little bit of everything for everybody, but we just wish more parents would have come out to take advantage of all the information that was available to them here,” said North Ward Councilwoman Tency Eason, who is also the president of the Orange PTA/PTO/PTSA District Council. “We plan to continue the effort and we’re hoping that our parents get energized and motivated to start attending the PTO meetings, Orange Board of Education meetings, and City Council meetings to let us know how they feel. We all have to work together to get the kind of educational results that we want for our children and, even though this was a very good start, there is still a lot more work to do.”

There were also several vendors offering a wide variety of products and services to attendees of all ages, including the Boy and Girl Scouts of America; Wachovia Bank; Karade Gymnastics School; Lincoln Technical Institute; the U.S. Army; Family Connections; the American Civil Liberties Union; Essex County College; the city of Orange Township Recreation Department; the Orange YWCA; and the Children’s Book Pantry of Orange.

Many of the vendors, such as Sparkle Entertainment, offered services catering specifically to the tastes and interests of the children who accompanied their parents to the conference or their class mates and counterparts who showed up on their own to get a glimpse of what all the talk of adult empowerment that they had been hearing about for weeks in advance of the event was all about.

“We were a part of the All Around the World theme that had been set up inside the gymnasium and we represented Italy,” said Sable Hightower, 18, an East Orange native and employee of Sparkle Entertainment who spent Saturday painting the faces and generally finding new and different ways to entertain and preoccupy the children who attended the conference in a positive way. “It was a carnival feel and theme. I think everybody who attended the conference enjoyed it.”

That was certainly the case for Serenity Odom, 10, who actually attends Park Avenue School as student every day throughout the week. She said it was “different but good” to see how her school had been changed to accommodate and host the empowerment event, but she didn’t mind any of that — so long as the organizers had everything back to normal by the start of the regular school week the following Monday.

"It's not just my school, it's for everybody, so we should all get to use it when we want to," she said. "I think learning is fun and I love math and reading because I like fairy tales and true stories. I don't like video games that much, but they're OK, even though I like to read so I can learn more words and get smarter."

Eason said that was the kind of spirit that she and the conference organizers at the PTO/PTA/PTSO were hoping to instill in all the attendees, regardless of their age. That also extended to parents like Christine Sutton and her son, Jonathan Laurore, a fifth-grade student at Lincoln Avenue School, and Wanda Rodrigues, who is a member of the Orange High School PTO who attended the conference with her daughter, Anissa.

"We held a raffle where all of the individual PTOs from the various schools donated gift baskets that were filled with everything from Nintendo Wii game systems to home entertainment systems," Eason said. "When we started out holding these conferences, we held them twice a year, in the spring and fall, but things changed over the years to the point where we hold it in the spring only near the end of the school year. But we're going to change that around for next year and go back to holding it in the fall because, that way, we can get parents the kind of information about the programs and what's going on in the district that they need in the beginning of the year, so they can use it and apply it throughout the school year."

For more information about the PTO/PTA/PTSO District Council and anything related to the Orange Public Schools, call 973-820-8999. Eason said they can also call her directly at 973-678-0163.