



Educating, Enlightening and Empowering African- American Women: Sisterbration

for which all women can strive. And Kimberly Clay, Ph.D., has taken it upon herself to empower African-American women to do just that.

A cancer researcher by trade, with a master's degree from UAB in health education and health promotion, Clay currently teaches as an assistant professor at the University of Georgia. But she's in Birmingham quite often, tending to her consulting firm, Imani Health Group and the non-profit she

founded three years ago, Sisterbration.

As Clay explains: "It began really before 2004 out of a program I was doing in my home called Chat and Chew for professional African-American women. It was an opportunity for us to have some conversation around issues pertinent to African-American women.

"It started with a small group of about seven women initially, and that

was back in 2001. Our first retreat was the next summer, with about 20 or 25 women at Twin Pines.

"After that it continued to grow, and more and more women wanted to join the circle. That's what prompted me to really move beyond my household. Other women wanted to become a part of the sisterhood, and so I wanted to make it available to women all across Birmingham—Alabama is our eventual goal."

Sisterbration, as its name suggests, is intended to provide a forum for women to celebrate the good things in life and was initially founded to simultaneously focus on the major health issues facing African-American women, which Clay names as cancer, diabetes and sexually transmitted diseases. As it evolved, however, the focus expanded to include finance, education and philanthropy, along with a number of other topics.

In terms of programming, Sisterbration currently organizes a year-long Fat Tuesday weight loss program consisting of women who are morbidly obese. At the six-month mark, Clay says this year's group of 27 is dropping significant weight. Sisterbration has also teamed up with AIDS Alabama to deliver a Girls Night Out program revolved around HIV/AIDS prevention for teen girls. And this summer Sisterbration hosted its first ever Power Breakfast Series aimed at personal and professional development and presented by Oxygen and Bright House Networks. (Clay describes it as one of their best events so far.)

This fall, Sisterbration will go on a hiatus of sorts while it gears up for Little Red Dress Tea Parties scheduled for February in Birmingham, Dothan, Montgomery and Tuskegee, where heart disease awareness will be the focus. But throughout the year, the 900 women who subscribe to the Sisterbration list serve will continue to receive newsletters, flyers and direct mail informing them about everything from health issues to finance.

Clay reflects on the power of an organization that has demanded so much of her time these last few years. "We have an extreme reach. We do so much that we can't capture on our website, or even sometimes in the news, but we really try to touch the African-American woman at every area of life, at every generation of life as well."

Delivering Reading Readiness: The Junior League of Birmingham

League in the world and the largest volunteer women's organization in the state, counting 2,700 active members, the Junior League of Birmingham packs a big punch when it comes to community outreach. And one of their 33 projects slated for 2007-08 could potentially touch every child in Jefferson County younger than 5.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was adopted by the League last year after careful consideration and research. Sheri Cook, past chair of Imagination Library and vice president of corporate finance for Protective Life, explains this program designed to develop reading readiness: "Any child who is a resident of Jefferson County between the ages of zero and 5 and who registers for the program will receive one free book every month in the mail until he or she reaches age 5."

The concept is simple, but the project's logistics are no small task. Fortunately, the books are shipped directly from the publisher, but the League is in agreement with the Dollywood Foundation to provide funding, solicit registration in the specified geographic area and enter the children's information into the database. And the League is enlisting the help of local organizations to get the word out about Imagination Library. So far they've worked with the Jefferson County Library Cooperative, the Birmingham City and Jefferson County school systems, area hospitals and day cares, the Head Start program and the Alabama

Partnership for Children, whose birthing kits distributed to parents of newborns will now include Imagination Library brochures. "We have also worked through our own projects. Anywhere the League has a project, we're trying to make sure that we also have our brochures," adds Cook.

Sign-up is easy, as the Junior League has set up an Imagination Library voice mailbox at 879-9861 for anybody who hears about the program; callers need only leave their address to be mailed a brochure. Parents can also register online at jlbonline.com.

Since Imagination Library launched in Jefferson County, Cook says that parents have given the League feedback such as "I didn't realize these books would be so nice" or "I can't believe the program is really free" and notes that the books are indeed high-quality, age-appropriate and selected by educators. And as these books come each month in the mail, the children who receive them become more excited about reading.

As a 10-year member of the Junior League, Cook believes that the structure and size of the organization is well-suited for this particular project. "The mission of the League is to empower women to better the lives of women and children in our community, and I think Imagination Library is a great example of that because it would be very hard for an individual or a small organization to take on registering all of the children in Jefferson County to receive books. I don't want to downplay the importance of an individual who volunteers with any organization, because that's tremendously important as well, but the power of being a part of an organization that can go in and literally change the landscape by taking on something as big as Imagination Library is huge." 