Doing What You Can With What You Have

Nikki Giovanni to Keynote Diversity Conference

Armed with a pen, paper and power in the written word, Nikki Giovanni has made a significant impact advocating for civil rights and equality for more than 50 years.

"I'm not a legislator, and I'm not President Obama. I'm just a poet," she said. "It's the talent that I have. Martin Luther King said the arc of the universe is wide, but it bends toward justice. So my talents, whatever they are, bend toward justice, and I'm fortunate that I have them. I'm not going to change the world, but you just do what you can with what you have."

Giovanni remembers the death of Emmett Till as being a major catalyst in spurring her to action in the civil rights movement as a teenager. She also recalls her grandmother being a "very activist woman" and an example to her. She's proud to have been a part of stopping the era of segregation and continuing to promote diversity.

Today, Giovanni serves as a distinguished professor of English at Virginia Tech University. Her poem "We Are Virginia Tech," which she read following the fatal shootings on campus in 2007, gained world-wide appeal and served as a powerful anthem during a difficult time.

She has never been shy about her opinions and views.

"Diversity is really, truly an issue for all of us. Men need to make adjustments too."

Giovanni knows that women are still facing daunting issues today.

"Probably most of the issues that women are facing, that are big issues and become public issues, are actually private issues: your right to reproduction, your right to be free from domestic violence," she said. "These are public issues but are left to be handled on a private level."

Above all, Giovanni hopes we can all find value in diversity, and be able to alleviate some of the anxiety that race and gender have caused, by simply getting to know each other.

Jonathan McBride, University Communications
Diversity Events

Oct. 4, 2010*: Voter registration drive, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 232, FREE.
*Voter registration drives also will be held Oct. 5-8.

Oct. 5, 2010*: Sessions on the Ledge featuring a variety of local performers, noon. SHEPHERD UNION ATRIUM, FREE.
*Sessions on the Ledge is held every Tuesday during fall and spring semesters.

Oct. 6, 2010: Poetry slam, 11:30 a.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 232, FREE.

Oct. 13, 2010: World Food Day highlighting the Hispanic culture, 11:30 a.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 232, FREE.

Oct. 14, 2010: WSU's Spanish Films "La habitación de Fermat," 5:30 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION WILDCAT THEATER, FREE.

Oct. 20, 2010: Diversity presentation "Voting Rights for All?" 11:30 a.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 232, FREE.

Oct. 21, 2010: Diversity presentation "Rape in the Congo," noon SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 232, FREE.

Oct. 28, 2010: Diversity presentation "Stop the Hate: Breaking Down the Wall of Hate," 11:30 a.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 232, FREE.

Oct. 29, 2010: Diversity presentation "The Diversity of Service: A Facilitated Panel Discussion," 9:30 a.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 232, FREE.

Nov. 3, 2010: Multicultural Youth Conference, 8:30 a.m. SHEPHERD UNION BALLROOMS, $10.

Nov. 11, 2010: WSU's Spanish Films "Celda 211," 5:30 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION WILDCAT THEATER, FREE.

Nov. 18, 2010: WSU's Spanish Films "Agora," 5:30 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION WILDCAT THEATER, FREE.

Jan. 17, 2011: Munch and March from the Marshall White Community Center to the Ogden Amphitheater with the Ogden Chapter of the NAACP, 8 a.m. MARSHALL WHITE COMMUNITY CENTER, FREE.

Jan. 17, 2011: WSU Gospel Music Festival with the Harlem Gospel Choir, 7:30 p.m. VAL A. BROWNING CENTER, AUSTAD AUDITORIUM, $5.

Women's Center Events

Oct. 5, 2010*: Parenting with Love and Logic workshop, 5:30 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 321, FREE.
*Workshops in this series also will be held Oct. 12, 19 and 26.

Oct. 5, 2010*: Healthy Woman workshop, 12:30 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 320, FREE.
*Workshops in this series also will be held Oct. 12, 19, 26 and Nov. 2, 9 and 16.

Oct. 6, 2010*: Single Moms United workshop, 12:30 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 321, FREE.
*Workshops in this series also will be held Oct. 13, 20, 27 and Nov. 3.

Oct. 7, 2010: Walk for domestic violence victims including music, food and guest speaker/domestic violence survivor Becky Doxey, 5 p.m. WEBER STATE CREDIT UNION PARKING LOT (4140 HARRISON BLVD.), FREE.

Oct. 7, 2010*: Women's empowerment support group "Mujeres al Poder (Women in Power)," 1 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION ROOM 321.
*Workshops in this series also will be held Oct. 14, 21 and 28.

Oct. 26, 2010: Women's Empowered Leadership Journey, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. SHEPHERD UNION BALLROOM $60/$50 MILITARY/$20 WSU STUDENTS.
Reflections on Women’s Studies

20 years of rethinking gender, history, feminism

It’s more of a challenge than an assignment, but every semester Maria Parrilla de Kokal asks her students to rethink history. “Look specifically at the roles women played. Focus on their contributions, struggles and successes throughout time and across disciplines,” she encourages. “Doing so will give you a new perspective, whether you’re male or female.”

Parrilla de Kokal is the coordinator of Weber State University’s Women’s Studies Program, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. The opening reception of the Diversity Conference will include a tribute to the program at 6 p.m. at WSU Davis.

With the celebration approaching, Parrilla de Kokal and other women’s studies faculty have been reflecting on the origins of women’s studies at WSU and the impact of the program on students, faculty, and the institution.

In the 1980s, a number of faculty members were interested in creating a women’s studies program, but it took almost 10 years for the dream to become a reality. During that time a group of faculty and students, both men and women, worked with administrators to determine the need for a program and to decide in which academic college it would reside.

“The time was clearly right,” recalls Kathryn MacKay, a history professor who served as the first program coordinator. “Many of Weber State’s new faculty were people who defined themselves as feminists, people who were interested in gender studies and women’s studies.”

Associate professor of political science Nancy Haanstad explains that the goal was to spotlight women’s experiences, whether in sociology or history or political science, that had been overlooked in traditional approaches to academic disciplines.

Parrilla de Kokal explains that the idea of women’s studies is to rethink history and other disciplines in terms of the roles women played. She also believes that the existence of such programs is a sign that times are changing.

“During the time the program has existed, our departments have all changed,” Parrilla de Kokal says. “There’s a larger number of women faculty now than there has ever been. In the department I come from, we are predominantly female and that was unheard of in the 1980s. I think that’s all connected.”

The Women’s Studies Program was founded on some basic tenets that remain to this day. Many courses are team taught and generally pair faculty members from two different disciplines, perhaps even two different colleges, to create an interdisciplinary tenor in each course.

Amanda Manchester, who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 2000 as a history major and women’s studies minor, feels the best things about the program were the faculty and the interdisciplinary classes.

“Being a history major in class with nursing majors or philosophy majors or business majors, you didn’t feel out of step,” Manchester said. “That was really cool, frankly, because I probably met a lot more students in the Women’s Studies Program than I ever would have in other classes.”

Adrienne Gillespie, director of the Center for Diversity & Unity, has taught in the Women’s Studies Program since she first came to WSU in 2005. “We learn to look at gender, the roles of society, and how those two categories impact each other, which are very different depending on which gender you are and which society you live in,” she says. “I’m always thrilled to see how engaged and critical our students are about theory, programs and policy, as well as their ability to analyze and critique our culture based upon what we do in women’s studies.”

Barry Toone, an alumnus who is now a trial lawyer and managing partner at Bowman and Brook, LLP, is living proof of the program’s ability to teach critical thinking, theory and policy. “I think I was the only male in most classes,” Toone says. “I was there to learn. I was there to better appreciate the concept of seeing the world through a different lens and the perspective of others. In that sense, I consider my education at WSU invaluable.”

After graduating from Weber State, Toone was accepted into Notre Dame Law School. He says his overall experience at WSU, including his women’s studies classes, not only helped him be admitted into law school but has served him well throughout his career.

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Gillespie believes the program’s emphasis on putting theory into practice is empowering. “It doesn’t matter if you’re a woman or a man. If you’re a person who’s interested in the quest for equality or equity, or if you are interested in understanding the dynamics of relationships in our society, this is the place for you.”

Frances Kelsey, University Communications

For more information on the Women’s Studies Program, visit weber.edu/womensstudies
WSU students help Guatemalan women jump-start business

What can you do with $50—buy some new clothes, a nice dinner or a video game? Or $50 could buy a pan, a sign, some beads, a little cloth—just enough to purchase economic freedom for some of the world’s poorest women.

Being able to significantly improve an individual’s economic situation with so little money is a difficult concept to comprehend, especially in the comforts of a university classroom. However, two groups of approximately 40 WSU students have witnessed the transformative power of microloans and have become great advocates.

In 2009 and again in 2010 foreign language professor Alicia Giralt organized trips to Guatemala to introduce students to the concept of microcredit. The students lent individual women in the village of San Pedro La Laguna 400 quetzals, or approximately $50 in U.S. currency, for goods and supplies to jump-start their businesses.

“The students benefit in ways that are unimaginable,” Giralt said. “When we are in the classroom, I teach the lessons, but when we get to Guatemala, the students teach the moms about business, about marketing, about how to improve the product they want to sell.”

Jason Herman, a Spanish major and chemistry minor, helped raise $2,000 in the Ogden community for the program. He then traveled to Guatemala and was paired with a woman who owned a tiny store. Together they made plans to increase the store’s inventory and visibility with a new sign.

Herman already knew about helping people; he had volunteered two years of ecclesiastical service in Mexico and wanted to become a doctor, but even with that background, he was surprised at the economic impact of microcredit.

“It was a phenomenal experience,” Herman said. “In this situation we were actually able to get to know the people and help them out in their personal financial lives and discuss their homes, their needs, their hopes and their goals.”

Herman had the opportunity to be part of the second WSU visit, which was especially rewarding because students witnessed the success of the first loans. They found the Guatemalan women had formed a cooperative to collect loan payments as well as to support each other. In just six months, all 24 of the original loans had been repaid with interest. The women were still in business, making and selling such items as tamales and tortillas, hot drinks and traditional embroidered blouses.

Adjunct foreign language professor and Guatemalan native Dolores Jasmer helped facilitate and participate in both trips. She said studies have found when women get income it trickles down to their children’s health and education, and eventually the whole community benefits.

“Studies show that the loans haven’t had the same outcome and success when they have been given to men,” Jasmer said. “Women have been shown to be more responsible in helping their families and paying back their loans.”

A third WSU trip to Guatemala is already in the works; donations and service-learning students are welcome. Eventually the dream is to create a learning center and museum where Guatemalan women can become literate while still operating businesses in shops below the school.

Herman said the program has given him renewed respect for the power of an individual and $50.

“It actually made me realize how similar we are as far as our goals,” Herman said. “Every person I spoke to had the same goal: help make a better world for their children.”

Allison Barlow Hess, University Communications