Students learn to ‘hustle,’ master finances at 1st Women’s Empowerment Conference

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The University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s Panhellenic Council hosted their first ever Women’s Empowerment Conference Oct. 14, inviting a national keynote speaker and women from around the local community to discuss what it means to be an empowered woman.

“What they did was find various people around the local community to discuss various issues that impact women,” said Erica Schwartz, assistant director of student engagement and leadership, Greek affairs.

The UL Panhellenic Facebook page states signup was $10 on OrgSync, though students were also welcome at the door to attend for the same price.

Around 8 a.m., women affiliated with any of the eight sororities that fit under the Panhellenic Council umbrella began showing up at the Student Union for registration.

Schwartz said the event was “certainly not just for sorority members,” and anybody would be welcome to attend.

The entrance fee provided attendees with a beige shirt, and soon they waited outside the Union’s Ballroom doors, wearing the silhouette of a woman, comic sans font stating on the face, “empowered women empower women.”

Danielle Cormier, senior child and family studies major, said she was not in a sorority but heard about the event via signs outside campus buildings. Cormier said she was excited for the conference, and she wanted to see “how Lafayette’s working to empower women locally and globally.”

A handout provided some of the round table topics: from “Living that Single Life!” to “Becoming a Superconnector” and “Achieving Your Financial Goals.”

Schwartz said the Panhellenic Council’s executive board was the driving force that organized speakers for the event.

“I think it gives the students a great opportunity,” Schwartz said, “because someone like Courtney has now planned a full leadership conference.”

Courtney Martinez, senior nursing major, is the vice president of programming for the Panhellenic Council.

Martinez stated executive members had attended a conference in Spring, which is where they first saw Bonny Shade, their keynote speaker.

“I want girls to have confidence in themselves. If other women can do it, so can they,” Martinez said about why they wanted Shade to speak at the conference.

“I’m advising and helping her through it, but she (Martinez) really gets all the pieces from event planning to budget management to contact with high level community leaders, so those are the experiences we think are great for students to get,” Schwartz said.

Before the discussions began, Shade had a chance to sit down and discuss her goals as keynote speaker.

“As I’ve grown up and had life experiences and learned a lot of different things, I’ve realized that we don’t have to stay in a box as women,” Shade said. “We’re able to break the glass ceiling and make changes and be those changing agents for the world.”

Shade said she believes this message of change is a powerful one, stating she takes lessons she has learned and finds ways to pass them onto other women.

Initially an educator with degrees in biology and creative writing, Shade said she enjoys teaching, but that through sororities and organizations she has learned to enjoy the teaching aspect of keynote speeches.

"Without fail," Shade said, "every time I give a speech or a talk, there are students that come and pour their heart and soul and story out to me. At first, I didn't know if I expected that to happen."

"When a student comes up to me," she continued, "talking about how she grew up in a very traditional household and has been forced to live in a bubble, and then after today, she feels like she has the skills and abilities to break through, that's been

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shocking, but also the most rewarding part of it as well."

“I’m excited to hear Skyra Rideaux and Karli Sherman,” said Katie Wappel, senior business informatics major. “They are super empowering and I’d like to hear what they have to say.”

Wappel, also president of the Alpha Omicron Pi sorority, said 14 members were sponsored, in order to “grow as a leader and empower others.”

Eden Abraham, senior visual arts major, said she was also excited to hear Shade.

“As a woman, she was completely unapologetic while being professional and vulnerable,” Abraham said. “I think those traits encompass what a female leader should be.”