

## Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

June 28, 2013



**Topic:** "Public Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: From Obesity to Infant Mortality, to Bioterrorism"

**Dr. Elizabeth Ford**, District Health Director of the DeKalb County Board of Health, joined us this month at Women in Leadership to share her journey and lead a discussion on a wide array of health-related topics.

Dr. Ford grew up in New York and knew from a very young age that she aspired to be a doctor. "Well, first I wanted to be a Rockette! No matter the choice, my parents always encouraged my dream, and never told me NO."

When she was 11 or 12, Dr. Ford's family moved to California and after high school, she attended Stanford University. "Although it was a struggle at times to be a 'have not' amongst many 'haves' in that environment", Elizabeth said, "I did complete my degree in psychology there. Following an accident in which I experienced what it was like to be a patient, the next step in my journey was a return to D.C. to pursue medical school at Howard University College of Medicine. Although surgeons may be at the top of the 'pecking order' in medicine, I found my passion for babies and decided to pursue what really brought me joy - pediatrics. The lesson for me is that you really must know yourself."

After medical school, Dr. Ford returned to her beloved CA and had a wonderful practice near the beach. But fate or providence soon intervened in the form of a former medical school mentor. "Basically she was disappointed that I wasn't doing more with my life. This not-so-subtle bit of pressure caused me to consider a change in direction."

An interesting and unplanned opportunity would soon provide just such a change. Dr. Ford accepted a position on the faculty at Howard University and later found out she was the only bilingual pediatrician on staff. (Note: she actually speaks French, Italian and Spanish but the latter was by far the most useful.) In an effort to understand managed care, Dr. Ford was prompted to take the GMAT and enroll in business school. With little sleep and no time off, she went to school at night and took calls in between lectures. Always the achiever, she set another goal for herself: to be a member of the honor society. In her last year of her MBA, Dr. Ford became pregnant but still managed to finish her degree as planned. Along with the latest degree, she added "Mom" to her many accomplishments when her son was born.

Fresh on the heels of receiving her MBA, Dr. Ford was eager to apply her newly honed management and business skills within the medical school. However, she was told that there were no opportunities to move up at Howard therefore she began looking for other opportunities.

In January 2003, Dr. Ford received an unexpected call from the State of Florida to see if she'd like to interview for the Deputy of Children's Services position. Surprised but interested, she took the opportunity to interview, was offered the job and accepted it! "The job turned out to be quite a wild ride," she explained, "particularly because I had no previous experience in politics. What I learned was that what I consider to be basic in regards to funding and public health was often difficult for others to grasp."

Another aspect of the job was traveling around the state. Like any mother knows, traveling a lot for your job can be a challenge. This factor along with a new husband who lived in Atlanta helped to bring about the next step in Dr. Ford's journey. In 2004, she decided to accept another opportunity – this time in Atlanta.

The position was heading DeKalb County's public health organization. Once settled in her new role, she was invited to join Leadership DeKalb and did so in order to learn more about her new county. She was also the first African American in her position.

“DeKalb County is an interesting place in terms of its size, its politics and the unique challenges presented due to a very large refugee and immigrant population, e.g., approximately 120 languages are spoken. In May 2008, another opportunity and challenge was presented to Dr. Ford. She was asked to take on the role of Acting Director of the Georgia Division of Public Health during a time of major reorganization. As the State Health Officer, she dealt with intense politics. Many of her colleagues did not understand that avoiding an issue doesn't make it go away. Funding continued to be an uphill battle and as she compared GA to other states, she felt that there were a lot of issues.

By this time, she was also a single mom again having gone through a divorce. “One day my son confronted me and told me that he hated my job because it made me too stressed. That was when I knew I had to make a change. I decided to transition back to my role in DeKalb.”

Back now in DeKalb, Dr. Ford has continued to work to educate the citizens – especially the youth - on issues related to teen pregnancy and obesity. The county's teen sexual behavior is astonishing and the data shows that 84% of kids cannot complete a basic fitness test. As Dr. Ford points out, “There is a clear correlation between fitness, nutrition and academic success.”

Leading by example, Dr. Ford has been influential in implementing wellness breaks into the work day in her own department and has recently become a certified zumba instructor in order to practice what she preaches!

Her key takeaway from her story is “never know your trajectory, but be prepared!”

## Q&A

**Q:** What progress is being made in physical education?

I give the government credit for the Shape Act. But we still need to consider more about what we do with the information that we have. We need leadership to understand the correlation between nutrition, wellness and academics.

**Q:** Are there intentions to get parents to understand the importance of such health issues?

We have several programs (i.e. Girl on the Run) that get parents involved. It's both a cultural and generational challenge. We need to teach kids discipline and prepare healthier foods.

**Q:** Does the school system work with the Alliance for Health?

Each school is unique. It's a challenge because everyone is focused on numbers.

**Q:** What do you focus on?

I do a lot of speaking and really try to engage parents.

**Q:** What about bioterrorism?

This is something that is hard to be prepared for, but has to be considered. You have to be prepared for emergencies, even though you never know how they will play out. Each family needs to consider the "what ifs" of any/all types of emergencies, disasters, etc. Have a plan, discuss the "what to do's" with all members of the family, etc. The county does have a plan for various situations but families have to do their part as well.

**Q:** How do you talk to small children about these issues?

Be very basic. Explain that emergencies are rare. Have a 'password' or safety code word for example for whoever picks them up at school.

**Q:** What is the state doing to promote wellness?

The state has accepted the 30" wellness break, which must be approved by a supervisor.

**Q:** What counties or states are benchmarks in this area?

There is no one state in particular, although Massachusetts is doing pretty well.

**Q:** How do you bridge the socio-economic divide?

We have worked with fast food entities, such as McDonalds on their egg white delight advertising campaign. Most farmers markets accept EBT and count 2 for 1.

**Q:** What about infant mortality and teen pregnancy?

Teen pregnancy is still too high even though it has gone down recently. Organizations such as MORE (Mothers Offering Resources and Education) make sure that other mothers get through their first year of motherhood.

**Q:** Will education come along with the new healthcare act?

Affordable healthcare will look much different for Georgia than for several other states.