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Diane Arneth, executive director of Community Health Action of Staten Island



Participants gather after the program. From the left are Ana Oliveira, president of the New York Women’s Foundation; Diane Arneth, executive director of Community Health Action of Staten Island; Alette Cepeda, director of the Center for Leadership and Community Engagement at Wagner College; Gonzalo Mercado, executive director of La Colmena; Luiza Tanuri, youth organizer for Make the Road New York, and Mary Caracappa, a New York Women’s Foundation board member. Photos by Claire Regan for the Staten Island Advance

Islanders come together to address needs of neighbors

Claire M. Regan For the Staten Island Advance

Staten Islanders care about their community, especially when it comes to issues facing women and families.

That message was heard loud and clear Wednesday night during a neighborhood conversation sponsored by The New York Women’s Foundation.

More than 75 people filled ArtSpace @ Staten Island Arts, a meeting room and gallery at the Urby apartment complex in Stapleton, to pinpoint Staten Island’s most pressing needs and brainstorm solutions for each one.

The event lived up to its billing as an exercise in collective action.

Panelists included Diane Arneth, executive director of Community Health Action of Staten Island; Gonzalo Mercado, executive director of La Colmena, a Port Richmond center that supports immigrant workers, and Luiza Tanuri, youth organizer for Make the Road New York, which assists Latino and working-class communities.

Alette Cepeda, director of the Center for Leadership and Community Engagement at Wagner College, moderated the panel discussion.

Not surprisingly, the opioid crisis, its impact on families and the demand for addiction services were issues at the top of the list.

Arneth said help is available 24/7 at the Next Step Resource and Recovery Center operated by her agency at 26 Bay St., St. George. “People can just walk in to the center,” she stressed. “It’s a friendly place, a place to get support.”

Next Step offers resources for family members of those struggling with addiction as well as harm-reduction counseling, Narcan training to treat overdoses and linkage to detox programs.

Arneth also explained the HOPE (Heroin Overdose Prevention & Education) program, which diverts low-level drug offenders into treatment instead of into court and jail. It was launched last winter as a joint effort between the NYPD and the district attorney’s office, she said.

“I see a shift,” she continued. “We are recognizing that people can be better helped with services instead of incarceration.”

ADVOCATING FOR IMMIGRANTS

The conversation moved to immigrants and the threat of deportation, a situation that has cast a shadow over several North Shore neighborhoods and the families residing in them.

“Folks are living in fear” of raids by ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), panelist Luiza Tanuri said. “They are vulnerable; their livelihoods are unstable” following the presidential election a year ago.

Panelist Gonzalo Mercado said the best way to fight fear is with information and a plan of action.

“You have a right to refuse to open the door” if ICE shows up without a warrant, he pointed out as an example.

He said neighbors can watch out for one another.

“It’s an opportunity for people to come together. The deportations will increase before they stop,” Mercado cautioned.

And he said women and families can be empowered by programs that foster economic development.



The neighborhood conversation hosted by the New York Women’s Foundation drew more than 75 guests to ArtSpace.

He described two worker-owned co-ops for domestic laborers — one for babysitting and child care and another for general cleaning services — that have been established at La Colmena, his community-based organization in Port Richmond.

In a Q&A session, one audience member asked the panel how racial tensions can be addressed. “People say things here they wouldn’t say in any other borough,” she pointed out with candor.

“We do see that,” Mercado acknowledged, calling for more opportunities for conversation to break down the tensions.

URGING TOLERANCE

Diane Arneth made a passionate plea for tolerance. A lifelong Staten Islander, she recalled seeing vehement resistance to the Rainbow Curriculum, an early effort to introduce LGBTQ issues in the schools. “You can’t hold on to that hate,” she said. “We are all human. We share the same goals and feelings and we can work together.”

“The vast majority of people are good people who want to do the right thing,” she added, overcome with emotion. “This is an opportunity to pull people together rather than push them apart.”

The audience responded with applause.

Ana Oliveira, president and CEO of the New York Women’s Foundation, commended the panelists and the audience for their wide-ranging dialogue. “The problems are the solutions; they live in the same place,” she said. “I am very moved by the level of this conversation and the togetherness” on Staten Island.

Established in 1987, the New York Women’s Foundation is a charitable organization that focuses on women’s health and economic issues and funds women leaders building solutions in their communities. Less than 7 percent of foundation funding in the United States goes to women and girls, and one in four women and girls are living in poverty in New York City, the foundation’s website points out.