The grand hall of Bert’s Warehouse Theater buzzed with lights, music, conversations and the pulsing energy of 1,250 older African Americans motivated to learn the commandments of healthier living. The June program marked the 6th annual celebration hosted by the Healthier Black Elders Center (HBEC), a joint program of the University of Michigan and the Institute of Gerontology (IOG) at Wayne State. “This event promotes diverse and interesting approaches to aging successfully,” IOG Director Dr. Peter Lichtenberg explained.

Dr. James Jackson of the University of Michigan, who co-directs HBEC’s parent organization with Dr. Lichtenberg, agreed. “Community outreach gives research a greater sense of purpose,” he added. “Enhancing Soulful Living by Remaining Healthier,” marked a new attendance record and a change of venue for the annual health reception. “Everyone loved the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History,” said Dr. Olivia Washington who directs the HBEC. “We simply ran out of space there,” she explained. “And we don’t like to turn away anyone who is trying to improve their health.”

The day-long event blended entertainment with health education. Music, long known to promote mental health, was a key feature, with the grand hall of Bert’s Warehouse Theater filled with the sound of live bands and dance floors.

Dr. Lichtenberg added that the event’s success was due in part to the collaboration between the University of Michigan and Wayne State University, which allowed for a diverse range of programming. “By bringing together experts from different disciplines, we are able to offer a comprehensive approach to healthier living,” he said.

The event also featured a series of health screenings, with a particular focus on diabetes and heart disease. Attendees were able to learn about the importance of regular check-ups and the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.

“By offering these screenings, we hope to raise awareness about the importance of health maintenance,” said Dr. Washington. “We want to encourage our community to take steps towards healthier living.”

The Healthier Black Elders Center (HBEC) is a joint program of the University of Michigan and Wayne State University’s Center for Urban African American Aging Research. The center’s mission is to promote successful aging among older African Americans in Detroit and beyond.

HEALTHIER BLACK ELDERs CENTER
Promoting Successful Aging in Detroit and Beyond

A Better Way to Learn about Your Health

Our Healthcare Consumer Learning Series provides free health presentations to help Detroit’s older African Americans learn the best ways to maintain good health. “This year we have a new look and feel,” said Dr. Washington.

The first health forum was for men only at Presbyterian Village of Brush Park Manor with experts in prostate health and sexuality. “The residents determined the content,” said series organizer Patricia Rencher. “Our planning team tailored the forum specifically for this group.”

Upcoming forums include:

- **Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Addictions but Were Afraid to Ask**
  - Nov. 21 from 11-12:30 pm
  - River Towers Retirement Community

- **Latino Americans Forum**
  - Dec. 11

- **Women Only Forum**
  - April 2009
  For details, or if your group would like to host a forum, please call Patricia Rencher at 313-577-2297, ext. 351.

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Detroit City Council Awards HBEC Efforts

HBEC Director, Dr. Olivia Washington, received two special recognitions recently. In June, the Detroit City Council awarded her a Spirit of Detroit award in recognition of her exceptional achievement, outstanding leadership and dedication to improving the quality of life for Detroiters.

Councilwoman Joanne Watson, who interviewed Dr. Washington about the HBEC reception on her televised Wake-up Detroit! show, joined other council members in presenting the award.

In October, Dr. Washington was one of only six tenured female faculty members selected by the Women of Wayne Alumni Association to be recognized at their 75th anniversary celebration.

RESEARCH ON AGING NEEDS YOU!

The Healthier Black Elders Center not only provides resources for today but it lays the foundation for reliable research for tomorrow. The HBEC invites everyone interested in its mission to join its pool of partners willing to consider participating in future research projects. Health disparities still exist between African Americans and other ethnic groups, so more research is needed to determine causes and solutions. A pool of potential participants is critical for this research.

The HBEC Participant Resource Pool (PRP) now has a data bank of 1,015 urban African Americans willing to consider taking part in a research project. “We have now exceeded our initial goal of 1,000 people,” said Karen Daniels, lead community outreach specialist, “but the work continues. We are deeply grateful to every elder who volunteers to help.”

Big Plans for Next Year

The HBEC Advisory Board has begun plans for next year’s Health Reception, so mark your calendar for another high-energy event. Detroit Police Chief James Barren and radio personality Jay Butler will share the podium as featured speakers. Chief Barren served on the Detroit force for 31 years before retiring in 2004, only to return this fall as the new police chief. A licensed counselor with a doctorate in counseling from Wayne State University, Chief Barren is widely regarded as an electrifying speaker. “The candor and good-humor of these two men will connect well with our guests,” Dr. Washington said. “They are models of public service.”

Bert’s Warehouse Theater in the historic Eastern Market will again house the Health Reception and include health screenings, exhibitors, live music, exercise, dance and lunch. As always, the event will be FREE to guests 55 years and older and their caregivers, but pre-registration will be required for all attendees.
Guests of any recent HBEC Health Reception are familiar with the brilliant works of Florida artist James Gibson. Each year, Mr. Gibson, 70, travels to Detroit to display select pieces of his art, brightening a corner of the event with the startling colors of his landscape oils. This past year, he surprised guests with a new addition: an easel, a blank canvas and a palette. He spent his time at the reception creating a remarkable mini-masterpiece amidst crowds of fascinated onlookers.

Mr. Gibson’s generosity of time and talent did not end in June. By September he had completed a large painting of Florida palm trees as a special gift to the Healthier Black Elders Center. The painting, titled “The Majesty of Sunset,” serves as a metaphor for vivid and inspired aging. The painting’s extraordinary sunset surrounds a pristine Florida landscape of marshland and palm trees, proving that the hours of sunset can be even more beautiful than the fleeting moments of sunrise.

Mr. Gibson, who was inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame in 2004, exemplifies the positive spirit needed for successful aging. His early years as an artist were marred by widespread discrimination that prohibited African American artists from displaying in major galleries. Forced to a life on the road, he and his fellow artists sold their paintings at roadside and became known as the Highwaymen. “We did what we had to do to get by,” said Mr. Gibson. “The important thing was that we were painting.”

Today his work hangs in the Florida Governor’s Mansion and the homes of Steven Spielberg, Gladys Knight, the Rockefeller family, and the White House. Though vision problems have recently plagued the prolific artist, he continues to paint daily. “I don’t mind growing older,” he said at the Health Reception. “As long as I can keep doing what I love.”

Registration Needed for June 2009

The 2009 HBEC Health Reception will require all guests to pre-register. The event will continue to be free to all attendees, but proof of registration will be required for entry so crowd size can be kept at a safe, comfortable level. Registration can be done by phone (313-577-2297), fax (313-872-6433) or mail. Confirmation and an entry ticket will be sent a few weeks prior to the event. Guests must show their registration ticket to enter.

“We have important reasons for asking our guests to pre-register,” said Dr. Washington. “This way we can guarantee that all guests have access to health screenings and exhibitors, and a comfortable seat for all aspects of the program. Our elders deserve this level of care and respect.”
Healthy Fun at Reception

From p. 1

and physical well-being, filled the day with live jazz by the Charlie Gabriel Band, special guest Marcus Belgrave and vocalist Joan Bow. Mr. Gabriel and Mr. Belgrave are older adults themselves and stunning examples of healthy aging. Creativity in fine arts was also on display in the works of Florida Highwayman James Gibson.

“We encourage movement, music, art, volunteerism, medical care, nutritious foods, laughter and education. Each of these can strengthen physical and mental health as we grow older.” -- Dr. Olivia Washington

Radio personality Jay Butler and Robert Chapman, M.D. of the Josephine Ford Cancer Center each spoke to encourage self-care with regular check-ups, nutritious eating and consistent exercise. Audience involvement in chair aerobics and simple dance moves rounded out the day. “There is no one right way to age well,” Dr. Washington said. “We each find our own healthy path.”

To help African Americans monitor their health, the reception offered free health screenings for common conditions such as high blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar. “Our healthcare partners provided 683 screenings,” Dr. Washington said. “Of those, 181 results fell in the high-to-dangerous range. We advised these people to see their physician immediately. This event doesn’t only change lives – sometimes it saves them.”

The HBEC reception uniquely balances research needs with outreach education. Guests of the HBEC event are encouraged to also participate in current research projects on aging. “Research without outreach is like a plan that is never executed,” Dr. Jackson said.