

## WFWP USA: Integrating Trauma into Purpose: HerStory New Jersey

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As many of our readers know, March is Women's History Month in the United States. This is a time when we give special attention to the amazing accomplishments and contributions of women, stories which have largely gone unrecognized in history narratives which are limited in scope. There are also many stories of women leading and serving in New Jersey communities, often quietly and behind the scenes. Thus, as a celebration of Women's History Month, WFWP New Jersey decided to hold a celebration and HerStory Awards Ceremony to unearth those precious stories.



On March 25 at the Peterstown Community Center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, 88 people gathered to hear and honor the stories of five amazing women leaders as HerStory Awardees and one women's organization as receiving an Outstanding Service Award. The HerStory Award was created in order to recognize women not only for their external accomplishments, but also for the stories of pain, heartache, and challenges which are behind the accolades. Each of the awardees shared their deep stories, lessons learned, and wisdom gained from their lives and quest to make the world a better place. It was a deeply moving and uplifting experience. Please enjoy a few highlights from each of their remarks.



*Ritu Chopra*

[Ritu Chopra](#) inspires people with her coaching sincerity and professional leadership experience that includes managing business and IT operations in Fortune 500 Companies for over 20 years. Ritu is an International Speaker, and Certified Executive Coach Author, TV Show host and a Humanitarian. She is

also the author of a recent book [Women Leadership in the 21st Century](#). During her speech, Ritu recounted her growing ambition ignited by her father and helping him as a child, experiences which gave her confidence and an ability to communicate. However, upon moving to the United States as a young bride with her husband, life took a nosedive and she faced a lack of access to resources, interruption in her higher education, physical and emotional abuse from those meant to protect her, and a car accident which left her unsure where to turn. She gathered her strength and fortunately many teachers appeared in her life who guided her in making her dreams a reality and transforming her situation. She said, "Of all the battles I have faced, I don't know how many I had won and how many I had lost. What I remember is that I fought all of them with all my strength... Today I stand proud and tall with all the opportunities I have been presented, some sour, some sweet, some bitter, some painful, some pierced my soul deep, some lifted my spirits up high, and so many teachers appeared from near and far and at every intersection to guide me."



*Marivir R. Montebon*

[Marivir R. Montebon](#) is a New York-based journalist who runs her online magazine OSM! (awesome!) which she co-founded with her daughter, Leani Alnica in 2012. She also produces and hosts Conversations with MM on the digital platform. In 2020, she co-founded MarieGraceMedia, a digital media platform. She set up a non-profit in 2019 called Women's Immigration and Communications Cafe. During her speech, Marivir shared her quest as a journalist and love for stories. Sharing her own painful story, Marivir recounted how her husband was assassinated in the Philippines during post-election violence. She was able to immigrate to the United States for political asylum with her daughter but her daughter later succumbed to cancer and passed away at the age of 27. She had to digest and reconcile these painful experiences, losing the child whom she nurtured and cared for, and even learning to forgive a husband who was murdered but was also her own abuser. She shared how finding the positive stories of accomplishment and triumph over pain as a journalist helped her to overcome her own difficulties and gain perspective on her own life. Writing gives her strength. Read Marivir's article about the event in [her online magazine here](#).



*Estrella Cash*

Estrella Cash is President and Owner of Cash Financial Associates. She has over 20 years of experience in the business and entrepreneurial arenas, the last four years dedicated to the banking industry. She has a Doctoral Degree in Education from Columbia University and Master's Degrees in several disciplines. Estrella shared during the event about her experience suffering multiple health conditions, including a heart attack and a stroke, but she promised to God, "If you just give me another day, I will continue as part of my legacy...I will always help the disenfranchised, the underprivileged, the forgotten, and the displaced." Though she is 73 years old, Estrella continues in her life's work to help women who are emotionally and physically abused to get out of poverty and become self-sufficient. She shared the heart-

rending story of helping one woman in particular who was abused by her step-father, and Estrella had to gradually gain her trust in order to help her find a more stable life for herself and her children. The audience couldn't hold back their applause in hearing her firm commitment and passion to help others, despite the marginalization she also faced as a woman from an ethnic minority.



*Kamlu Gulrajani*

Kamlu Gulrajani is a retired information technology specialist. During her career and continuing to the present, Kamlu has been involved in initiatives and organizations focusing on community service, health and wellness, and cultural awareness and heritage in Central New Jersey. She serves as an officer at Agraj Seva Kendra, an Indian cultural organization in Middlesex County. Right from the start of her remarks, Kamlu pointed out that though what we see is a "Baby boomer model" standing at the mic, our true essence comes from inside, not from what we see externally. Even though she faced challenges in her life such as losing her job several times; she didn't let anything stop her, instead she updated her skills. She now uses those skills she learned to teach and empower others to find a silver lining in any difficulty and there is a spirit watching over all of us. For example, she teaches children that family stands for "Father And Mother, I Love You."



*Priscilla Garces*

The final HerStory awardee to share was Priscilla Garces, a Climate Reality Leader, mentor and disability advocate/activist. Despite her visual impairment, she completed her education with honors, including a Master's Degree in Nonprofit Leadership/Development from Fordham University. Priscilla is now the Co-chair of NJYD Disability Caucus, and is a member of several committees including the Union County Board on Persons with Disabilities, the Union County Human Services Advisory Council and the Township of Union Mental Health Committee. Priscilla shared her own story of losing her sight when she was a baby in Ecuador due to lack of access to adequate medical facilities. Her family didn't let the impairment stop her and encouraged her to dream big, utilizing the accessibility resources available as much as possible, though it took a while to get up to the standard we see today. She shared about having to carry heavy braille books for school, much heavier than regular books. However, the most important thing that she gained is that she learned to see with the heart instead of the eyes, which she believes has helped her excel in her life thus far.



The awarding ceremony concluded with an Outstanding Service Award to Josephine's Place, accepted by Sheila Casey, Executive Director. Josephine's Place in Elizabeth, New Jersey creates a safe, welcoming space where women have access to classes, workshops and programs that enable them to grow in confidence, develop competencies and life skills, realize their potential, and uplift their families, communities, and future generations.

Overall, it was a wonderfully inspiring way to spend an afternoon. These precious and hard-earned stories and experiences surely had an impact on those in attendance and we hope will ripple out to more in the community and beyond. The Mayor of Elizabeth, New Jersey, J. Christian Bollwage; Councilwoman-at-Large for Elizabeth, N.J., Patricia Perkins Auguste; and Assemblyman for N.J.'s 20th District, Reginald W. Atkins, also stopped by to offer their congratulations to the awardees and to recognize the occasion of Women's History Month. Several of the participants noted they hope to see this kind of event continue, perhaps even bigger and better next year!

