

Famous tap dancer shares story at Wonder of Women

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SOUTHINGTON – The Women & Girls Fund held its 21st Wonder of Women event at the Aqua Turf Club Tuesday where visitors listened to the words of renowned tap dancer Ayodele Casel and celebrated the awarding of a record \$65,000 in grants to 18 organizations supporting women’s initiatives over the last year.

The Women’s & Girls Fund started in 2001. As an endowment with the Main Street Community Foundation, the fund has grown to nearly \$800,000 to support the quality of life for women and girls. The fund serves Bristol, Burlington, Plainville, Plymouth, Southington and Wolcott.



Dean Wright | Staff Tap dancer Ayodele Casel emphasizes the importance of women sharing their stories now so they are not lost to history.

Co-chair of the Women of Wonder Event Carolyn Ziogas shared that women had made much in the way of progress, however, political empowerment and economic opportunity remained a place where gaps were large.

“We can find comfort in knowing that because of that dream that was realized in 2001, the growing endowment of the Women & Girls Fund will be here to meet the needs of local women and girls in the future,” she said.

Women & Girls Fund Advisory Board Chair Jessica Pieri said the night was about honoring the success and impact of the fund as well as the role of its supporters.

“Your support has led to the awarding of over \$668,000 to our nonprofit partners serving women and girls in Bristol, Burlington, Plainville, Plymouth, Southington and Wolcott,” she said. Among the 18 organizations to receive \$65,000 in record grants awarded, many were still navigating the effects of the pandemic.

Speakers of such grant receiving organizations, Margaret Bozek of the Children’s Law Center of Connecticut and Lauren Kittle of the Parent Child Center of Bristol Youth and Community Services, thanked the fund for its help and emphasized the importance of their work in supporting area residents.

Laura Schlesinger Minor, a participant in the early focus groups of the Women & Girls Fund, introduced the evening’s speaker, Ayodele Casel, as a premier Broadway tap dancer and choreographer who had overcome a variety of adversities in her lifetime. Having met Casel through Minor’s late father, she has remained a friend and supporter of the dancer.

Casel is noted for being recognized as one of the New York Times “Biggest Breakout Stars of 2019,” an artist in residence at Harvard University and a leading tap choreographer on the revival of Broadway’s “Funny Girl.”

“Being a black and Puerto Rican woman from the Bronx are identities that I really honor in everything that I do. It’s how I walk through the world with pride and even in my art I always honor that identity,” she said.

Casel knew she wanted to perform since the age of nine, however, had not encountered tap dancing until 17. She was raised in Puerto Rico before returning to New York and joined performing arts center lessons. She remembered growing up wanting to be a performer and eventually encountered the works of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

“I loved them. I thought they were magic,” she said. She remembered going to the library and borrowing movies and going home to watch them and attempting to teach herself how they performed..

“I felt like I was Ginger Rogers and I was obsessed with her,” said Casel. “I was inspired by the fact she had an entire identity apart from her male counterpart, that she was a dramatic actress, that she did 30-plus films without Fred, that she won an Academy Award and that in her interview she was adamant about standing up for herself and reminding people that her identity and her legacy was not totally wrapped up in Fred Astaire.”

Casel said she wanted to be a tap dancer and a dramatic actress but wondered how anyone would consider a black and Puerto Rican girl from the Bronx in that fashion.

With the guidance of a high school film teacher, she was accepted into the New York University Tisch School of the Arts and took part in her first tap class. She remembered working with a fellow dancer who helped strengthen her skills. From that individual, she learned that tap dance wasn’t just about a series of movements but expression.

“I learned that tap was born in this country, and even though at the time the only thing I knew was Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, I learned from him that this art form was my ancestral legacy as well,” Casel said.

She learned about William Henry Lane, also known as “the father of tap dance” Master Juba, who was the first African American to receive top billing over a white performer as part of a minstrel show. She learned about other women like her in an article called “The Hidden History of Black Women in Tap Dance” and was able to establish a dialogue with Jennie May Ligon, the first African American woman to be signed to a major studio. She noted many other women who had been performers, like her, but remained relatively overlooked for being black women.

“These steps are like my words. My words, my English and my Spanish words that used to get jammed right at the exit point of my mouth, they seem to have found a way to flow out through my feet,” said Casel.

Because of what she learned about those who came before her, she noted it was important that she document and share her experience so her story would not be different from those who came before her.

“I have lived with the determination to change that for myself and to urge everyone that I interact with that our time here on this Earth is short and our stories matter and that we need not wait for an invitation to tell it,” she said. “We owe it to ourselves and every generation that comes after us.”