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"bridging our communities"

Rockaway Woman Receives Award from Former President

By JOHN E. THOMAS

As an entertainment ambassador, Far Rockaway's Nichelle Brown excels on and off stage. Since her chance participation in a talent show sponsored by the All Stars Talent Show Network (ASTSN), in 1989, her success as a performer and ambassador for the organization has led her down a road of many successes. On March 8, Brown shook hands with former President George Bush and received the prestigious Points of Light Award at a luncheon held in Manhattan by the National Points of Light Foundation.

"I didn't even know I was nominated," said Brown of her surprise at notification. "I found out a week before the ceremony." Regardless of her surprise, those whose lives she has touched have been aware for some time of her contributions.

According to its mission statement, the Points of Light Awards, honoring individuals who have continually helped others through community service, are given based on the community's need and the nominee's solution to its problems, connections between people built through the nominee's efforts, ongoing involvement, innovative approach to a problem, and the impact of the persons' problem solving abilities.

Citing her role as a "powerful and extremely creative contributor" to All Stars for over a decade, the Foundation also recognized Brown for bringing the highly successful youth outreach and development program to Far Rockaway. "He really appreciated my work with kids in New York City. He said that people like me shine like points of light across America" Brown said of her conversation with former President Bush.

Brown first became involved with All Stars in 1989. A welfare parent, she had spent much of her life on the streets. "I was hangin' out, rappin' in the school park," she said. "Someone handed me a flyer, and I auditioned."

For her first audition, Brown brought two friends as background dancers. In subsequent performances, one a semi-final round, Brown increased the number of dancers each time to strengthen her act's presence. At the Town Hall finals in 1991, she took the \$1000 first prize flanked by a squad of 25.

Most who participate in the talent shows sing, dance, rap, perform skits or read poetry. Those who

cares for a daughter, LaToya, 16, carries a full-time job, and is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in either youth counseling or social work at Empire State College.

"I want a degree that will get me even more involved in the kind of work I am doing," she said.

Though Brown's status and experience with ASTSN has put her in the capacity of spokesperson and donor relations associate, she is still an active volunteer at every event, where her knowledge of stage production is a valuable asset to the less experienced. She can be found wearing any number of hats on the job: registration desk attendant, trainer of new volunteers, or security supervisor. On top of it all, she stays close to her love of performing.

In 1999, Brown wrote and performed a rap piece in the off-Broadway production *Crown Heights*, a healing play for racial tensions between blacks and Jews presented at the Castillo Theater in Manhattan. Her rap themes often focus on taking a bad situation and making it better. She also plans to perform in a gala honoring Governor George Pataki for his support of ASTSN on April 8.

Daughter LaToya is now involved (her own singing group has won two grand prizes) and her friends are often the subjects of mother's recruiting efforts. The two plan to perform together in the May 11 Bronx All Stars Talent Show.

"My message is that I am a former single welfare parent and people should use my life story to see that through a volunteer program, you can help yourself and your community," said Brown when asked to summarize her mission.

As for the recent praise and recognition: "This just inspires me more to get out and help my community."

ASTSN's mission is to give young people a creative alternative to acting out aggressively or violently. Those wishing to become involved with the project can do so by calling (212) 941-9400 or visiting the organization online at www.allstars.org.



Pictured left to right: Nichelle Brown; All Stars Project founder, Dr. Lenora Fulani; former President George Bush and AOL/Time Warner CEO, Gerald Levin

wish to be involved in the production end can work as stage hands or hosts at events. Many of the young men and women who danced behind Brown were introduced to All Stars and are now involved as volunteers.

Following her first success, Brown became an active volunteer at many shows and worked recruiting members of her own community to audition. She produced her first All Stars Talent Show at Far Rockaway's P.S. 42 in 1992.

Today she is regarded as an ambassador and spokesperson for the organization. Her strengths lie in her devotion to helping people improve their lives through her example and the ability to connect with others over social and cultural divides.

Her tireless passion for the stage and community service has provided unending inspiration to all young people who have come in contact with her. On top of her indefatigable commitment to local youth, Brown