

"POTO MITAN": CHANGE AGENTS THAT PROMOTE WELL-BEING IN THE HAITIAN COMMUNITY

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The Bi-annual Conference on Haitian Mental Health was held on Saturday, May 5th, 2018. In partnership with the Haitian Mental Health Network, the conference was hosted by the Center for Multicultural & Global Mental Health at William James College, and was sponsored by the Department of Mental Health as well as other natural collaborators. Individuals, agencies, and institutions that serve in the role of a "poto mitan" or pillars of the Haitian community were identified and celebrated as assets that strengthen the community.

This year's conference brought together local, national, and international agents of social change for a cross-cultural dialogue on ways to improve health, promote mental health, and embrace overall well-being. The presentations were focused primarily on community engagement and empowerment, capacity building, and social justice and advocacy. The Keynote Address, delivered by sociologist Abner Septembre, offered an overview of a sustainable community empowerment model in Haiti where local citizens have developed and implemented a self-sustaining association of community members focused in part on education, health, agriculture, environment, micro-enterprise, and tourism. The Invited Address, delivered by W. Didi Bertrand, a medical anthropologist and community health specialist, highlighted ways of bridging the gap and reducing disparities in accessing care by addressing psychosocial and socio-economic factors in order to transform mental healthcare experience for women and girls in both Rwanda and Haiti. The Conference also included three dynamic panel presentations that described: 1) the service learning experience of graduate psychology students addressing global mental health needs while building multicultural competency skills in Haiti; 2) bicultural and bilingual school allies and their roles in conducting family outreach and engagement; and 3) local community-based organizations serving Haitian youth, families, and elders as well as promoting social justice. The last panel issued a call-to-action for all to stand with members of our immigrant community, including Haitians, who are on Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

In celebration of the month of May as Haitian Heritage Month, there was a networking lunch with an opening reception for the Haitian Art Exhibition that will be on display at William James College through June 28, 2018. The networking lunch included tasty Haitian cuisine, vibrant Haitian art, and rhythmic Haitian drumming. The day ended with a ceremony honoring the following three "Poto Mitan" Award recipients: Dr. Nicole Prudent, a local primary care pediatrician who co-founded Youth and Family Enrichment Services in 2003; Ms. Marie St. Fleur, JD, who was elected to serve in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1999 and is the first Haitian-American elected to state office in the United States; and Mr. Abner Septembre, sociologist and founding member of the Association des Paysans de Vallée (Peasants Association of Vallée in Petit-Goâve, Haiti), established in 1987.