

Longview conference tackles community poverty

by Reese Gordon rgordon@news-journal.com | Posted: Wednesday, October 16, 2013 4:00 am

Deena Shelton and Leila Thompson came from different backgrounds, but both overcame the same obstacle — poverty.

The two women spoke Tuesday to more than 350 people during the first Poverty Conference at Maude Cobb Convention and Activity Center.

The conference — aimed at creating solutions to community poverty — was sponsored by The Longview United Way, Partners in Prevention, East Texas Council of Governments, Workforce Solutions East Texas and Region 7 Education Service Center.

LeTourneau Professor John Feezell organized the conference with students' assistance.

“Poverty has faces just like culture has faces,” Shelton said. “The differences in them are vast.”

Now a graduate adviser at LeTourneau University, Shelton said she would not have a platform to speak if others had not taken a vested interest in her well being.

“We can't pull ourselves up by our bootstraps,” she said. “I got out through education. The reason kids from poverty often don't succeed in education is not because of intelligence or dedication. Problems stem from the lack of family involvement and resources.”

She said she grew up in a small home in Mississippi as one of six children who depended upon her father's yearly salary of \$24,000.

Shelton often worked two jobs starting at age 14 and paid for her first car at 16.

Thompson, raised solely by her mother, said her experiences dealing with “generational poverty” led to her involvement in criminal activity resulting in a seven-year prison sentence.

“I wanted to have what other people had,” she said. “If you don't start taking care of the child, the child will start taking care of themselves. I don't want my daughter to go through what I did.”

Thompson, now employed and able to provide for her 10-year-old daughter, credited Partners in Prevention's Getting Ahead Program for helping turn her life around.

“You've got to get motivated,” she said. “If you're trying to get some help, ask somebody. We need a little extra help to get where we need to be.”

The latest U.S. Census Bureau numbers from 2010 show more than 23 percent of Longview's population live in poverty and that number is higher — 25 percent — for residents younger than 18.

Keynote speaker Ruby Payne, an educator and author of the book, “A Framework for Understanding Poverty,” said the removal of barriers separating race and class is vital in decreasing poverty.

“One of the reasons that it’s been so difficult to deal with poverty is because there are four different research bases on causation and they’ve been politicized,” she said. “If you’re on the political right, you think it’s these two, and if you’re on the political left, you think it’s these two. In reality, it’s all four.”

Jane Tran, an accountant for the Texas Diversity Council, helped organize the Poverty Conference as a student in the poverty and micro-finance class at LeTourneau University. Tran graduated in May.

“We worked on half of this conference,” she said. “I’m really excited to see our work in class actually come true. I’m from a poor country in Vietnam. It’s just inspiring to me that people in America are working on this problem.”

Mick Normington, business researcher and editor for the Texas Workforce Commission, told the audience that reducing poverty in communities hinges on the ability of students to graduate high school.

A high school diploma, he said, is the single most important thing prospective workers need now when looking for work.

“Employers have many more people applying for jobs than they have to offer,” he said.

The organization of a conference analyzing factors that contribute to poverty is the only way the community will start to help itself, Shelton said.

“We can’t legislate people into prosperity,” she said. “The only way we can make a difference is by getting involved with each other’s lives.”

Feezell said the conference would not have been possible without the support of sponsors, which he said contributed resources, expertise, guidance and wisdom.

Money raised Tuesday will be put aside to help continue the event in future years, he said. Attendees paid \$45 to attend the conference.