

NJEA convention returns to Atlantic City

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ATLANTIC CITY — Inside the main hall of the Atlantic City Convention Center, thousands of teachers from around the state collected pens, and stress balls, and packets of information on new products and services during the annual state teachers convention this week.

“I come every year,” said Pleasantville paraprofessional Barbara Mayssonnett.

Mayssonnett said she was excited to learn more about New Jersey Education Association member services related to her contract, which was recently approved by the local board of education. She was also interested in the technology.

On Thursday, Mayssonnett was seated on a section of green carpet inside the Social Emergency Response Center with two other educators learning how to weave a bracelet with colored thread from Daniela Ceballos.

Social Justice played a big role again in this year’s convention from professional development workshops to its keynote speaker, Jacqueline Woodson, an accomplished and award-winning author who has written many books related to the topic. The theme of the 2018 NJEA Convention is Standing Together: Social Justice = Education Justice = Student Success.

During her presentation Thursday, Woodson told the crowd that when she realized she wanted to be a writer, not everyone was on board.

“Of course it wasn’t feasible according to my mom because it wasn’t going to earn me a job and get me out of her house,” Woodson said.

She said it was her teachers who gave her an opportunity to write and helped encourage her.

“I think that’s so important, I’m sure some you all know, to see your students,” Woodson said. “It could have so easily gone another way.”

Woodson, who serves as the Library of Congress’ National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, said that her platform is “reading equals hope times change.”

“I definitely believe that when we read we meet people we might otherwise not meet,” said the author of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, among her dozens of works. “Reading changes us and the hope too is that we can have those conversations.”

During her speech, Woodson read aloud passages from her books and talked about her influences and methods in writing. She said that authors have a social responsibility when writing to make children feel seen.

“Seeing the mirrors in the stories of other people is so important,” she said.

The convention also included a panel discussion with the State Board of Education and Education Commissioner Lamont Repollet.

"Teachers and schools have the power to change lives," Repollet told the teachers. "Education is the economic engine for the success of our state."

Along the perimeter of the main convention hall, "classrooms" were hosting workshops on topics from Google Classroom to STEM education. In the smaller rooms throughout the convention center, professional development workshops touched on an array of education topics.

For some local teachers, it was their first time attending, including Diana Haugh of Wildwood School District. She said her coworker, Sam Notos convinced her to come.

"There's some interesting opportunities for field trips," Notos said.

Cecilia Mirabella, a Spanish teacher in Atlantic City, said she wanted to explore new things for her classroom, especially technology.

Sally Blizzard, a teacher at Holly Heights Elementary School in Millville, was working a booth for the Cumberland County Education Association Thursday. Blizzard said she liked the convention's social just theme.

"I think people don't realize how much those concepts impact our children in the classroom," she said.

Stacey Salerno of Lower Township School District is part of the convention planning committee and said the theme was "excellent."

"We all need to be inclusive and realize it's not all about us. It's about everyone," she said.

The convention concludes Friday afternoon with more workshops and the Celebration of Excellence to honor NJEA Hipp Foundation grant recipients, the 2018-2019 New Jersey Teacher of the Year Jennifer Skomial, and this year's Award for Excellence recipient Zellie Thomas.