



BY SUSIE WILSON
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SEX MATTERS

In one of her final appearances before a live audience as co-anchor of NBC's Today show, Meredith Vieira — who is leaving her five-year successful run to pursue other challenges — came to central New Jersey on Wednesday to moderate a panel at the Healthy Woman's Forum, a day for women to discuss "vital concerns and learn new, healthy practices that can boost confidence and competence both personally and professionally."

Over 350 New Jersey women gathered at the Forum in West Windsor to listen to advice on how to lead more healthy and meaningful lives.

A segment of the Forum will air on Today on Tuesday, June 7th.

The Healthy Woman's Forum is the brain and heart child of Joyce Hofmann and Sharon Rose Powell, Ed.D., two residents of the Princeton area. Hofmann has run the Princeton Weight Loss Corp. for over 25 years; Powell, directed the Princeton Center for Leadership Training for 22 years and now provides counseling through her firm, Princeton Psychological Partners, LLC.

The day's goal was "to examine how to find balance in our daily living and promote our physical

and mental health." Workshops focused on promoting physical and mental health, including how to lose weight and keep it off, alternative approaches to medicine, the challenges of midlife and beyond, including menopause, raising children with less stress, and overcoming anxiety and fears.

Prior to the Vieira-moderated panel, we attended two of seven workshop offerings on promoting physical and mental health. I attended "Midlife and Beyond: Balancing Hormones, Emotions, Nutritional, and Metabolic Need" and "Matters of the Breast," since I thought I might hear some sexual health discussion.

The "Midlife and Beyond" workshop, led by two physicians, focused on menopause and the controversial issue of hormone replacement therapy. The take-home messages of the workshop were that there's nothing wrong with taking hormones safely, and an educated patient is an important part of the decision.

When sexuality finally surfaced in the session, the discussion focused on clinical aspects connected with women at midlife: painful intercourse, lack of desire, vaginitis, yeast infections, pelvic pain, and fibroids. Although one of the physicians mentioned the need for "adult sex education," there was, sadly, no discussion about the emotional, non-medical aspects of sexuality at midlife, involving love, intimacy, and new relationships.

Similarly, the discussion in "Matters of the Breast" focused solely on the medical aspects of breast cancer. I understand this approach, as there were breast cancer survivors in the workshop who wanted the latest information about surgical choices, treatments, cure rates, reoccurrence, and how to have a positive attitude. Yet the subject of sexual desire after breast surgery and partners' roles in post-surgical relationships never arose.

The workshop's message was reassuring: Most lumps are not malignant and 75 percent of breast cancers show no family history. We also learned that about 200,000 cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed this year—the median age at diagnosis is 67 years. Twenty-two percent of new cases will be diagnosed among women 75 to 84 years old. (The message here: keep getting an annual mammogram.)

The physicians leading both workshops stressed the importance of good health practices that

include diet and exercise in order to control weight gain and reduce the intake of estrogens, which are connected to breast cancer.

Vieira, who was introduced as "the warmest, most down-to-earth anchorperson in broadcast news," moderated a star-studded panel. It included Anne-Marie Slaughter, Ph.D., who resumed her named professorship at Princeton university after doing a stint in Washington D.C. as director of Policy Planning in the U.S. Department of State; Amy Robach, the Saturday Today anchor and national correspondent for NBC Nightly News who lives in Hightstown, NJ; Andrew Shue, the actor who is married to Robach; Stephanie Byerly, M.D., a professor of Anesthesiology and Pain Management at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, and Dr. Kate Thomsen, M.D., who after a distinguished medical career started an innovative private practice in integrative health care for women in Pennington, NJ.

The panel discussed how busy women could find balance in their lives. Slaughter went so far to say that "women can't have it all." She recommended that they make choices and compromises, even giving up a dream job, as she has recently done, and redefining a career to accommodate family responsibilities.

Robach and Shue cautioned that "you don't have to be your kids' best friend." (They became the poster couple for "blended families" after marrying; her two daughters and his three sons now live under one roof.) Their point was that hovering over children and trying to have them love you all the time puts undue pressure on adult parents. Shue went so far as to say "a parent's job is to love a child, not necessarily the reverse." They plan their lives so they have two kid-free days a week.

Dr. Byerly said that women have to learn to ask for help as well as give it and added that "most people don't find themselves until they are 30." Dr. Thomsen talked about her theory that change happens "in a spiral pattern: you make improvements and then fall back only to spiral up again."

An audience member asked Vieira and the panelists how they defined success. The answers included such thoughts as "love and knowing that you are loved, making a difference to others, raising empathetic children, keeping your sense of humor, and making breakfast for my kids, every day."

Vieira told a delightful story about herself that still lingers with me. She said that "having it all is a real burden and disservice to women, and dropping the ball is okay." As an example, she spoke about feeling guilty for days because she missed one of her children's "Colonial Day" at school because of a work conflict. Their answers made me realize that we each have very personal definitions of success. And our definitions may change and develop with the years.

In closing the panel, Powell reiterated that Vieira was leaving Today and that "transitions are scary." Vieira walked away from the Forum and into her challenges engulfed in a warm wave of applause from this group of New Jersey women, signifying their appreciation of her work on Today and their hopes for her future.

Let's hope that the messages learned at the Forum strengthen the health and well-being of all women.

Susie Wilson, former executive coordinator of the Network for Family Life Education at Rutgers University's Center for Applied and Professional Psychology (now renamed Answer), is a national leader in the fight for effective sexuality and HIV/AIDS education and for prevention of adolescent pregnancy. She can be reached at susie.wilson@comcast.net.

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