

Sold-out Audience Proclaims 'WE CAN' At Seventh Annual Event

by Jennifer Sexton

HARWICH PORT— "I am blessed and happy. I honor what you are doing here. There is nothing better than a welcoming community to make life worth living," said WE CAN's 2011 Woman of the Year Dorothy Stoneman to a sold-out audience of over 350 at the organization's seventh annual Words, Wit and Wisdom literary event at the Wychmere Harbor Club on Thursday.

Stoneman is founder and president of YouthBuild USA, an organization that empowers disaffected youth to take control of their futures by building infrastructure in their disadvantaged communities. She also chairs the National YouthBuild Coalition, which has nearly 1,000 member organizations in 45 states, Washington, D.C., and the Virgin Islands, and which enjoys bi-partisan support in both houses of Congress. Stoneman was honored for her life-long commitment to social justice, her advocacy for those who lack a voice, and her success in engaging at-risk young people to become productive members of society and leaders in their own communities.

Stoneman follows in the footsteps of former WE CAN women of the year Diane Rehm, Anne Meara, Dr. Donna Shalala, Tyne Daly, Julie Harris and Claire Murray, each honored as a woman who inspires other women by example. Stoneman was presented with WE CAN's traditional maritime deck prism award, used for centuries on sailing vessels to refract and disperse natural sunlight to dark areas below deck.

"The prism symbolizes how the honoree lights the world," explained author Anne LeClaire of Chatham, the event's emcee.

For 10 years, WE CAN has helped Cape Cod women of all ages navigate life transitions such as divorce, career change, job loss, illness or retirement. In 2010, WE CAN provided nearly 2,000 women with information and referrals, mentoring, free legal services, training and workshops, empowering these women to achieve lasting positive change for themselves and their families, and ultimately, for the entire community.

This year's theme was "Imagination at Work: In Writing and in Life." The featured panelists were internationally acclaimed authors Andre Dubus III ("The House of Sand and Fog," "The Garden of Last Days," and just-released "Townie: A Memoir"); Jane Hamilton ("Laura Rider's Masterpiece," "A Map of the World," "The Book of Ruth"); and Margot Livesey ("The House on Fortune Street," "Eva Moves the Furniture," "Banishing Verona" and numerous non-fiction essays). As LeClaire introduced each author, she emphasized that imagination is present at the heart of the work of each

author, along with love, generosity and connection, all qualities that resonate with WE CAN's mission.

Margot Livesey was the first to address the audience.

"What a wonderful cause, and of course it is impossible to say no to Anne LeClaire when she asks you to do something," Livesey remarked, eliciting much laughter. "I hope she doesn't ask me to do anything I don't want to do, or anything too challenging, like swimming to Nantucket." Livesey went on to discuss her upbringing at a boys' school at the edge of the Scottish Highlands with strict parents who felt children should be seen and not heard. Clearly, a life of the imagination became her escape. "I'm happy to be here today," she said. "I am happy to be on the planet of authors."

Dubus was the next at the podium, joking that Livesey and her charming accent were a hard act to follow. "Couldn't you just listen to her all day?" he asked. Dubus then turned serious, making clear his enthusiasm for the mission of WE CAN. "Thank you all for supporting an incredibly significant and important organization," he said. "If I were a billionaire, this would be my one cause: single mothers raising kids with no help. They are my heroes." Dubus went on to read from his recent novel "Townie," which chronicles his early years being raised by a single working mother in a depressed Massachusetts mill town and his early turn to violence. "I learned a lot about my life writing this thing," he said.

Hamilton was the final author to speak, returning for her second turn as an author at WE CAN's annual event. "Thank you for inviting me back into your circle," she said, following with a story about encountering a reader on a train who, upon discovering that she was an author, downloaded one of her books onto his e-reader and proceeded to read it in front of her. "I have never before wanted to leap from a moving train," she laughed.

The floor was opened to questions from audience members, who queried the panel on topics ranging from their writing processes to specific inquiries about characters in their books to how they mine their memories for use in memoir and fiction.

WE CAN's executive director Andi Genser then took the podium to introduce Melinda Lancaster, an author, poet and

single mother of three with two step-daughters who took part in WE CAN's 2009-2010 PathMaker's program.

"It takes amazing courage to tell your story to 350 strangers," Genser said. "We are incredibly grateful that she is willing to do it because she believes in WE CAN. It is my privilege and honor to introduce this poet, published author and mother, my personal hero."

Lancaster described her difficult upbringing, recalling that in the winters as a child she was cold and hungry, using plastic bags inside her sneakers instead of boots. After attending college and serving in the U.S. Navy, she married and had three children, one of whom was diagnosed at age 15 months with a rare condition called Rett syndrome which causes reversion to an infantile state. She soon divorced her increasingly abusive husband, and observed, "Thank goodness my childhood was so difficult, or I'd never have been prepared for my adulthood." Diagnosed with a neuromuscular disorder possibly brought on by stress, Lancaster found WE CAN in 2009, entered the PathMakers program, and met her mentor Chris Jacobi. "I knew I wanted to be a writer, and Chris became my sounding board," Lancaster said. "She is one of my dearest friends, and I am forever in her debt."

Stoneman was then honored with the WE CAN Woman of the Year Award. Janet Weatherbe, WE CAN's board president, praised Stoneman as well as WE CAN's volunteers and "small but mighty" office staff.

"I haven't really prepared something to say, and now I have so much to tell you," said Stoneman. She went on to describe growing up female in the 1940s and the demoralizing experiences of sexism that caused her to pursue a career in social justice.

"Being a woman in a male dominated society is a never-ending process," she said. "The WE CAN spirit of surrounding someone and saying 'We will not leave you alone. We will not,' is what strikes me about this organization. The work of opening the door for people to fulfill their aspirations is the most fulfilling work on earth."

For more information about WE CAN's work for women in transition, call 508-430-8111 or visit www.wecancenter.org.

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