

Conference Focuses on Women in Media

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Salem State University hosted its Fifth Annual Women's Leadership Conference, titled "The Portrayal of Women in the Media" on March 9 in the Campus Center.

The conference included two educational sessions addressing stereotypes of women in the media, followed by a dinner, keynote speaker, and closing reception. The goal of the conference was to raise awareness of the truth that the mass media is swarming in unhealthy standards about gender roles, body sizes, self-control, violence, and sex appeal and that this exposure distorts our perception of women between idealism and reality.

The central focus of the night was motivational speaker Stacy Nadeau, alumna of DePaul University in Chicago and one of six women featured in Dove's 2005 "Real Beauty" campaign. The campaign made national news after boldly displaying the six women in just their underwear on a Times Square billboard.

In her speech, Nadeau--who said she's a size 10/12--urged women and men to embrace women's real beauty and shed current media ideals of that beauty. The campaign's purpose was to disclose to society what women look like in their "real" bodies, not among layers of Photoshop and digital enhancing. Such advanced technology makes the media's depiction of the "perfect" body unattainable.

The campaign led to the women's appearance on shows like Oprah, Ellen DeGeneres, The Today Show, and The Tyra Show, creating both positive and negative publicity. Either way, it made society become aware of the reality that the media uses advertising ploys as an incentive to sell products.

Nadeau said, "In this society we don't sell a healthy ideal; we sell a thin ideal." While most were in favor of the campaign, some responded with vicious insults calling the girls "fat" and "unattractive," and saying that they were an "embarrassment to advertisements." Women around the country were outraged by these comments and responded both in solidarity for the six candidates and speaking for themselves and on behalf of women around the world.

Nadeau said that "The campaign became about saving and changing lives" and that "If they could just change one single life, then all their efforts were worth it." With their efforts and inspiration they were able to save a young girl battling anorexia nervosa, who gained 13 pounds in the weeks after her mother showed her the ad images, which is a substantial amount of weight for anyone struggling with that disease.

Nadeau advised that the first step to "real beauty" is by reinforcing positive thoughts about body image with friends and throughout the community. She said that one person's idea of healthy may not be the same as the person standing next to you. Moreover, the sizes of one's clothing is not the "healthy" that is universal for everyone.

"The best you can do is be your best healthy self and overall acceptance is a place you get to by yourself," Nadeau said. She added, "If you can put enough of us together for the same cause, watch us change the world."