



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James Sanders Jr.

Senator James Sanders Jr. Commemorates 400 Years Since the Beginning of African Enslavement and the Fight For Freedom

JAMES SANDERS JR. September 4, 2019



Senator James Sanders Jr. (D-Rochdale Village, Far Rockaway) hosted a special event on August 30, 2019 entitled “A Tribute to the Ancestors,” which held directly outside the Black Spectrum Theatre on the lawn in Roy Wilkins Park in Jamaica.

It commemorated 400 years since the beginning of African enslavement in America and the continual fight for freedom. The event also highlighted the perseverance of Africans from 1619 to the present.

“We are here to honor these creative, industrious people, who despite being kidnapped and brought to our shores against their will, were resolute in their fight for human dignity and equality,” Sanders said. “I trust that our ancestors will find some solace in us marking the occasion as we continue the resistance.”

Assembly Member Clyde Vanel co-hosted the event with Senator Sanders. Many Southeast Queens officials supported the commemoration including Councilman I. Daneek Miller, who also attended.

The event began with Senator Sanders re-enacting a slave auction and summoning the spirit of Angela, the first African slave who was brought to Virginia 400 years ago. Southeast Queens resident, Doneath Powell, portrayed Angela, and stood chained as the song “Bid ‘Em In” played in the background. The tune comes from the 2004 film of the same name, which depicts how a young woman's humanity is cruelly rejected, as she is placed on the auction block of a small southern town in pre-civil war America.

The program also included an opening prayer from Pastor Beverly Sharod of Bethel Gospel Tabernacle Church; a tribute to the ancestors with the pouring out of libations; and traditional African dance performances and drumming, both by Raphael Sanders featuring The Brooklyn Love. Arianna Taitt, a student at the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, also gave an amazing dance performance.

The keynote speaker was Dr. Ron Daniels, Founder and President, of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century. He discussed the hundreds of years of African oppression from the first slaves arriving in the United States to the Jim Crow Era of segregation and finally to the present day accomplishments of black people.

“We have made progress, but the fact of the matter is if you look at America’s dark ghettos today, we still have millions of black people, who are still struggling in poverty,” Daniels said. “Millions of communities are plagued with de-investment and de-industrialization, all across this country, and so we have an obligation to continue to struggle for the liberation of our people.”

Also speaking at the event was Anne C. Bailey, Professor of History & Africana Studies at SUNY Binghamton; and the Rev. Dennis Dillon of Rise Church, New York.

“Have we come far enough?” asked Bailey. “That’s the big question. Do we feel collectively that we have come far enough from the legacy of this past? Do we feel like we have made enough progress? If we haven’t made enough progress, where do we want this to move forward?”

The event concluded with Powell reprising her role as Angela, and in an impassioned voice reciting the poem “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou,” which says, in part, “*You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes, You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I’ll rise.*”

Senator Sanders’ Office would like to extend a special thanks to Carl Clay and the Black Spectrum Theatre who helped facilitate the event by allowing us to use their outdoor stage and space.