

Prominent Old Harbour diaspora group fetes hundreds in home town.

Article by:

OLD HARBOUR NEWS



OHFA members surround Onika Russell (forefront in blue), who received the OHFA Memorial Award. (OH News Photo)

Hundreds of residents from in and around the Old Harbour area on Wednesday were feted by the Old Harbour and Friends Association (OHFA), the most prominent diaspora group to have emerged out of the Jamaican community.

The occasion forms part of a series of events commemorating the group's 30th year of existence as a charity organization.

Held on the grounds of the home of late justice of the peace Gloria Robinson, who was a humanitarian at heart, some 500 hundred people were fed, received free health examination and went home with bags of goodies containing food items.

The camaraderie was exceptional throughout the day as persons were kept entertained to classic reggae music, as many recounted the good times of yesteryear.

However, one of the main highlight was the presentation of the OHFA Memorial Award to Onika Russell, a standout academic achiever at Old Harbour High despite her obvious physical challenges associated with premature birth.

In a brief retort, Russell says she's grateful to receive the award and thanked OHFA and her family for their unwavering support.

The OHFA Memorial Award was rebranded in recognition of its late founding members, four of whom are deceased, says Hugh Robinson, who was among the nine individuals who created the charity body in 1993.

Throughout the ensuing years OHFA, with its headquarters in the United States, has offered aid in the form of scholarships, grants and social partnerships, to hundreds of people from Old Harbour, whether they are living here or overseas.

It was therefore fitting to see some of the beneficiaries of OHFA's goodwill present for Wednesday's occasion, all taking the time off from their jobs to give back for a noble cause. Among the past recipients who turn up were Colvis Thompson, a supervisor at the Port of Kingston; Kayla Beckford, director of investigations in the Office of the Public Defender; Kelisha Morris-Adams, educator at Old Harbour Bay Primary; and Dr Lavinea Smith, a medical doctor based at the Mandeville Regional Hospital.

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Onika Russell shares a light moment with past OHFA scholarship recipients. (OH News Photo)

Underneath a tent, each former beneficiary spoke highly of OHFA's impact on their journey to achieve a higher education as well as its influence on how they all perceived life and treat people in general.

"We are committed to continue the work because they have shown us what it means to give back and how it feels to give back and it has become a part of who we are. And we are committed to continue the journey," says Beckford, supporting of a similar point that Thompson had made.

OHFA was a life-saver for Morris-Adams, whose education was about to come to an abrupt end after finishing primary school. She recalled the devastation felt when her father told her the family was not in a position to send her to high school because they do not have the money.

Back then as a pre-teen she had big dreams which she managed to achieve thanks to OHFA's scholarship. Today because of OHFA, Morris-Adams says she was empowered to assist three of her siblings to attain tertiary degrees.

"I remember the teacher saying to me 'Kelisha, you don't have to be wealthy to achieve'," she said.

"I want to tell you that these people are genuine," she added. "And the fact that they're here giving back not just to students but to you all I'm, asking that whatever way, shape or form they ask us to give let's do it because when they save one person in a family, I can tell you."

For Dr Smith, OHFA "changed my life significantly" after he mother was murdered by her father when she was a little girl.

"Old Harbour and Friends have been with me every step of the way," she stated. "It is not just getting the scholarship alone. They help you through university, because trust me, coming from a poor family... I know what it is to be poor, I know what it is to help somebody and I appreciate all the work this organization has been doing for the Old Harbour community."



Hugh Robinson (right) presents the OHFA Memorial Award to Onika Robinson. (OH News Photo)

President of OHFA Lavern Robinson says the association will always be committed to the people and true to their cause. She recounted the challenges of the global Covid-19 pandemic and the resilience of the team during those difficult times.

“We don’t wait to have functions to get funds to assist the needy. We all get together and we go into our pockets and put funds together and make sure they are taken care of,” she told the gathering while acknowledging local sponsors OJ Coolers, Farmers Jerk and Lisa Black, who played a lead role leading up to and during the execution of the event on the day.

Now that the health pandemic is over, the group staged in May its annual fundraising Spring Ball in New York with more than 300 people in attendance. Some of the proceeds were used to fund Wednesday’s event, said Robinson.

Custos of St Catherine, Icylin Golding, who is a member of OHFA, says the parish “is proud of Old Harbour and Friends Association because out of the little they have, they are giving back in a way that the awardees are now giving back which is really commendable”.

Old Harbour News is a community-based online news media outlet based in Jamaica with more than 300,000 unique visitors since 2013.