

State Supreme Court judges visit ECSU

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WILLIMANTIC — State Supreme Court Chief Justice Richard Robinson and Justice Maria Araujo Kahn were on hand April 2 as Eastern's Social Work Program celebrated its 20th anniversary.

The justices served as the program's keynote speakers.

The social work department also hosted its first Forensic Social Work Conference that day.

A packed house in the Betty R. Tipton Room heard Robinson and Kahn address the subtlety of racism in our society.

Eastern President Elsa Núñez opened the conference and congratulated students and faculty in the Social Work Department for their dedication to social justice.

"In the 20 years since our program was founded, more than 600 students have graduated from Eastern and gone on to support families and communities as social workers in state agencies, health care organizations, school systems, child welfare and family service agencies, mental health programs, hospitals, community agencies and domestic violence programs," said Núñez. "Others have been admitted to Master of Social Work programs at prestigious programs across the country."

To better deal with the issue of racism, Robinson and Kahn said people need to "Turn Off the Autopilot," referring to a program the two justices present to audiences that focuses on the challenges that arise when people are from different cultures, not proficient in English or have a disability.

Implicit biases are the culprit, according to Robinson



State Supreme Court Justice Maria Araujo Kahn reveals a list of double standards resulting from hidden biases that stereotype women in a program held recently at Eastern Connecticut State University. Contributed photo

and Kahn.

All people unwittingly hold implicit biases, they said, in the form of stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about social groups — men and women, white and black, old and young, majority and minority, fat and thin, liberal and conservative and more.

These beliefs and attitudes can affect one's perception, behavior and judgment about people in those groups, they said.

"Implicit biases — the autopilots — leave people blinded by their own prejudices. People don't even real-

ize what they are saying," said Robinson. "The autopilot leaves them culturally incompetent and they make decisions that negatively impact the decision-making of hiring staff, assigning work and giving promotions.

"We need to get off autopilot. We need to grow our awareness of the nuances of cultural issues, language barriers and disabilities generally."

The justices' presentation mixed compelling pictures, cartoons and humorous, entertaining videos in capturing the attention of students, faculty, staff and area residents.

In drawing attention to the issue of implicit biases, they also offered a set of skills and resources for people to use when interacting with individuals in an increasingly diverse community.

"Implicit biases," Kahn said, "are a person's gut justice, an autopilot that compels one to look for shortcuts throughout the day in one's interactions."

She cited numerous implicit association studies and television commercials, showing how preconceived stereotypes interfere with how someone assesses people who do not look like them.

"Example: When people see a black person and say 'I don't see color,' Oh yes you do. You take information about black people already in your head, which rejects notions of you opening your mind more to being a more transparent human being," Kahn said.

To support her research, Kahn revealed an overwhelming list of double standards resulting from hidden biases that stereotype women on a daily basis in almost every social or professional environment, including her own place of work.

"These micro-aggressions, these unintended slights, these cultural shortcomings, have a powerful impact on our daily interactions," she said.

Social work major Francelis Gonzalez Perez said "Chief Justice Robinson and Justice Maria Khan left a huge impact on all the social work students who attended the first Forensic Social Work conference."

The conference featured a number of social work scholars who conducted breakout sessions on issues social workers address in their daily profession