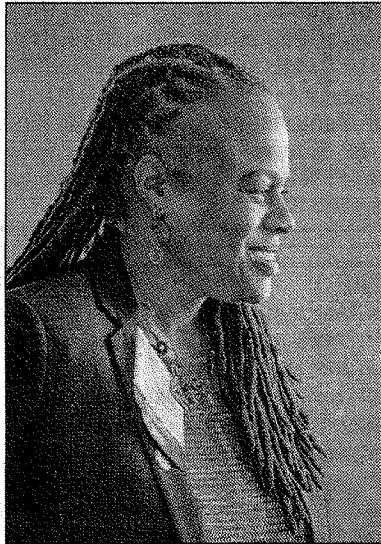


Chandler represents 'the best of Branford'

1/18/19

MLK speaker, social justice leader returns home to deliver talk



Contributed photo

Branford native Beth Chandler, the newly appointed president and CEO of YW Boston, will speak at this year's MLK Breakfast on Monday.

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — When it came to finding someone who embodies the social justice ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the annual breakfast in his honor this year, Beth Chandler, the newly appointed president and CEO of YW Boston, stood out from the rest.

That the 19th annual MLK Breakfast, slated for Monday, Jan. 21, at Branford High School, comes at the outset of a yearlong celebration of the town's 375th anniversary, made the selection of the Branford native as speaker even more fitting, according to MLK Breakfast committee member Eunice Lasala.

"In her work to promote social justice and inclusiveness, Beth Chandler represents the best of Branford," she said.

Chandler, 52, grew up on Bryan

"We wanted to have someone whose work involves helping others and looking out for each other, because that's what Dr. King was all about, and that's who Beth is."

Phoebe Chandler, MLK Breakfast co-chairwoman and mother of speaker Beth Chandler

Road with her older brother Joe Jr., mother Phoebe, and father Joe Chandler, a basketball coach at Cheshire High School who also served on the Branford Board of Education. The family attended St. Stephens AME Zion Church, which held a Third Sunday Break-

fast each January.

That tradition launched the first annual MLK Breakfast in 1985, a few years after Martin Luther King Day became a national holiday, according to Phoebe, who's been involved with the breakfast since the beginning and once again is serving as co-chair with Maryann Pellegrino.

When she was in the second grade at the Sliney School, her teacher had a message for her mother.

"He told me, 'Beth is going to be doing things,'" Phoebe said. "Beth is going to be running things."

Those words proved prophetic. In her senior year at Branford High, Chandler was class president. The 2001 inductee into the Branford Sports Hall of Fame also co-captained the basketball team to

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a state crown and national ranking for the third straight year, and was part of a volleyball team that claimed three successive state championships.

At Harvard, where she majored in economics, she was a two-year captain of the basketball team. Not long after she graduated with honors, she was preparing to begin work as a research evaluation analyst at the Urban Institute, the Washington, DC-based think tank engaged in economic and policy research on racism and segregation in U.S. cities.

The phone rang. It was her coach.

"They were looking for an American to go to Austria and play basketball," Chandler recalled in a telephone interview from her office at YW Boston, the full name of which is the YWCA of Boston.

Two years later, she returned. The Urban Institute had held the position open for her.

Her next stop, after earning an MBA in business and management at Columbia Business School, was as a corporate banking associate at Bank of America.

Thereafter, she resumed, as The Boston Globe put it

in an August 2018 profile of Chandler, her "long career working on social justice issues."

Those included leadership roles at NeighborWorks America, which creates opportunities for people to live in affordable homes; at the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation, which was established to ensure that low-income people have access to legal representation; and at Achievement Network, a national nonprofit dedicated to helping urban schools improve student performance.

At YW Boston, where she was named president and CEO last August, she continues her work advancing the rights of the underrepresented, including women and people of color.

Founded in 1866 as the first YWCA in the country, "YW had a lot of firsts to empower women in particular," she said. "Early on in the organization, women across race and ethnicity would come together. We're seeking to do the same work, but from a systemic perspective. We want to address systems in place that reinforce racism."

That won't happen overnight. "The building of cathedrals in Europe took generations before people would know what they were building toward," she

said.

That doesn't mean she won't keep at it.

Her two children motivate her to continue her work. So does personal experience. "I know firsthand how bias negatively impacts people of color," she said.

And not just on the interpersonal level. "One of our initiatives is trying to get businesses and other organizations to more deeply understand racism through discussion sessions. You have to be aware of what's going on within the system to be able to address the issues," she said.

It's that kind of enterprise that informed the committee's choice of Chandler as speaker.

"We wanted to have someone whose work involves helping others and looking out for each other, because that's what Dr. King was all about," Phoebe said. "And that's who Beth is."

The 19th annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Breakfast is on Monday, Jan. 21 at 8:30 a.m. at Branford High School, 185 East Main St. For tickets (\$10 adults; \$5 children ages 5 to 12), call 203-467-9180. Proceeds from ticket sales benefit the CT Food Bank and the Fuel for the Elderly programs.

Lisa Reisman may be reached at lisareisman27@gmail.com.