

Burke native to speak at Women's Fund event

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The Burke Women's Fund will host its fifth celebration on Saturday at Waldensian Presbyterian Church in Valdese. The organization will recognize this year's grant recipients, and Burke County native Kesha Nichols will deliver the keynote address.

Created in 2009, the Burke Women's Fund operates under the auspices of the Community Foundation of Burke County, according to its website, and is comprised of women who pledge annual donations as members.

The organization "aspires to connect all parts" of the community and "to bring a diverse group of women together around substantive issues relating to women and families."

Nichols, who now lives and works in New York City, was born and raised here in Burke County and said she's excited to return for this special occasion. Nichols said she's proud of her ties to Burke County.

"I was born at Grace Hospital. I grew up in Drexel, and I went to school in Morganton," she said. "I started dancing at Sherri's School of Dance when I was 4 years old. I'm very close to my family, and I come home whenever I can."

Nichols graduated in 1996 from Freedom High School and has since crossed many goals and achievements off of her to-do list. She owns

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Kesha Nichols,

Burke County native and former cast member of "Basketball Wives"

and operates her own dance production company called Sugar and Spice, and was recently featured in the fourth season of the VH1 TV series "Basketball Wives."

"When I was on the reality show, I was bullied like I never had been before about being mixed, and people said I'm not black enough to be called Kesha. I was unusual because I have a Southern accent," she said. "I realized that there's a platform here, and instead of bashing the people who said those things, I decided to educate myself on what bullying really was."

"I thought of it before as kids picking on each other on the playground, but adult bullying exists, too. There are so many people deal-

ing with it out there, so I wanted to use this platform as a way to let them know it's OK to stand out."

As an advocate for anti-bullying, Nichols said she encourages people everywhere to embrace their own multicultural ethnicities. She's now launching a new lifestyle brand and movement called "Blendiva" for girls and women of mixed ethnicities and cultures.

Nichols has been speaking out against bullying for several years in public schools, colleges and private establishments. Although she frequently travels to visit her family in Drexel, the Burke Women's Fund annual event will be the first time that she speaks at an event in her hometown.

"I might live somewhere else, but I'm a Southern girl at heart and I'm proud to be from Burke County," she said. "I never stay away from home for too long, and I'm really excited to be speaking for the first time in front of my friends and family."

Saturday's program will be held at 10 a.m. in the church's Pioneer Hall, located at 215 Main St. in Valdese. The event is open to the public and admission will cost \$5 per person, payable at the door by check or cash.

Those interested in attending are encouraged to R.S.V.P. by Thursday to Immiller@bellsouth.net or by calling 828-437-7105. All proceeds from the event will support the Burke Women's Fund Endowment.