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A Dominican Republic native who uses her platform as a Maryland lawmaker to be a voice for disenfranchised African-Americans brought her impassioned message of justice and reconciliation to UMES Thursday.

State Del. Joseline Pena-Melnyk delivered a powerful midday lecture that was part pep-talk and challenged her Fitzgerald Center for the Performing Arts audience to confront head-on the state's ugly history of lynching.

"Race is a difficult topic to discuss," Pena-Melnyk said, adding, "we need to have this discussion. We need to honor those lives" of lynching victims.

Her remarks resonated with students, faculty, staff and community members; they instinctively rose to their feet in applause and appreciation at the end of her 30-minute presentation.

Dr. Marshall F. Stevenson Jr., dean of UMES' **School of Education, Social Science & the Arts** (<https://www.umes.edu/SESA/>), invited Pena-Melnyk to visit Princess Anne to share why she drafted legislation this year the state General Assembly adopted to create the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

What the gathering heard was a story of an eight-year-old girl who came to America with her single mother and quickly developed the tenacity to overcome hardships while embracing empathy for the downtrodden.

A passion to help others led to a career in law, and for the past 13 years as a member of the Maryland House of Delegates representing Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties.

Pena-Melnyk, who described herself as Afro-Latina, said the recent national movement to acknowledge the role lynching played in American history inspired her to speak out about Maryland's past - and the lack of justice addressing those crimes.

"I love being a voice for the community," she said, pacing energetically back and forth in the Fitzgerald center orchestra pit as well as up and down the center aisles.

Before she spoke, Stevenson arranged for a showing of a 17-minute mini-documentary on the state's last known lynching, produced by the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project.



State Del. Joseline Pena-Melnyk



Del. Pena-Melnyk chats with senior Lidia Chery

“The Lynching of George Armwood” is about a man murdered in 1933 by mob rule in Princess Anne and features interviews with some of the victim’s relatives and historians telling the story that played out in graphic detail in newspapers. No one was prosecuted for committing crime.

“Every time I watch it,” Pena-Melnyk said at the start of her presentation, “I get angry.”

“We have to take our anger,” she said, “and turn it into something positive, something constructive.”

“We need to acknowledge it,” she said.

Over the next three years, the reconciliation commission will conduct hearings and research across the state with

the goal of crafting an accurate accounting of all the unlawful lynchings that occurred in Maryland.

Where that work will lead is unclear, but Pena-Melnyk noted the law empowers the state attorney general with subpoena power - an important investigative and law enforcement tool.

UMES will have a role in helping shape the commission’s findings. President Heidi M. Anderson appointed Stevenson to represent the university on the panel, which has a designated seat for a historian from each of Maryland’s four historically black institutions.

In welcoming listeners to hear Pena-Melnyk speak, Stevenson called her appearance “part of a teachable moment. This is part of understanding our painful past ... and working to heal.”

After Pena-Melnyk’s presentation, Stevenson said he came away from the event convinced it resonated with students, in particular, as well as demonstrated to the guest speaker the university is poised to be her partner moving forward.

“I had a wonderful time,” she said as she exited the Fitzgerald theater. Her first visit to UMES “was very energizing.”