

Author Celebrates African-American Marriages In Book, Play

By CYNTHIA POST

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Author Julie Rainbow celebrates African-American marriages in "Standing the Test of Time: Love Stories of African American Elders."

In her first book, Rainbow, also an educator, artist and playwright, interviews 20 African-American couples, who have been married for 30 years or more.

The couples' stories, told in their own words, reveal their lessons for long-lasting love and commitment.

In partnership with the 2003 National Black Arts Festival, "Standing the Test of Time: The Play," will be presented July 25-27 at The Studioplex, 659 Auburn Ave., N. E.

"The play will show long-lasting love can exist in African-American marriages," said Rainbow.

The production will be directed by Hilda Willis, executive director of the Performing Arts Program for Youth, who has helped Rainbow shape her book into a play. Rainbow was inspired to write the book to honor the wisdom of African-American elders whose candid stories helped her heal after her first marriage ended in divorce.

"I wanted to know how they sustained their marriages," she said. "I believe they are experts, because of the breadth and depth of their experiences."

Rainbow is program director and curriculum specialist for Girls' Outdoor Adventure for Leadership, or GOAL, a not-for-profit organization providing both indoor and outdoor experiential programs that build leadership in young girls.

She holds degrees from Spelman College and Bryn



JULIE RAINBOW

Mawr College.

A Raleigh, North Carolina native, Rainbow was raised in an African-American community in which relationships with elders were a part of her daily experiences.

"Elders have always been a part of my life," she said. "I wanted to learn from people who look like me and have similar experiences."

"The African-American experience is an unique one, therefore common relationship challenges manifest themselves differently in African-American marriages," continued Rainbow.

Believing in the power of sharing stories, Rainbow has developed her book into a play to be used as a catalyst to encourage African-American women and men to dialogue about the "work of relationships."

What began as a research project quickly became a collection of elders' personal stories,

said Rainbow.

"I learned the relationship is bigger than individual expectations or needs," she said. "Each couple talked about the spirituality of their relationship."

"Communication is also important," continued Rainbow. "The way men communicate is different, not wrong. The women learned how to respect and embrace some of the ways their spouses behave in their

relationships."

Rainbow chose couples married 30 years or more due to research showing these couples have a low rate of divorce.

According to Rainbow, the characteristics of a committed, long-lasting marriage include: spirituality; communication from the heart; willingness to remain engaged in the relationship; self-introspection; remaining committed, by any means necessary; flexible roles; and forgiveness.

"These couples have learned how to forgive on a daily basis," said Rainbow.

"Though the book is about marriage, it is also about finding ways to integrate elders into our lives," said Rainbow. "We have mentors for other areas in our lives, but not for our marriages."

Tickets for "Standing the Test of Time: The Play" can be purchased on the day of the event or by calling 404-688-9471.

FAMILY

Elders teach about love

An author examines long marriages among African-Americans

BY BRIDGETTE A. LACY
STAFF WRITER

After Raleigh native Julie Rainbow went through her first divorce in 1989, she started identifying African-American couples who had been married for 30 years or more.

She was looking for mentors of sorts, couples who had weathered life's storms, helping, supporting and being respectful to each other during both the good seasons and turbulent periods of marriage.



Julie Rainbow profiles 20 couples in her book.

During that time, Rainbow was working toward her master's in social work at Bryn Mawr College, outside of Philadelphia.

"I had to dispel the myth that African-American families were pathological and dysfunctional," she says during a telephone interview from her home in Atlanta.

More than a decade later, Rainbow turned her research into a book called, "Standing the Test of Time: Love Stories of African American Elders" (Pilgrim Press, \$20).

She profiles 20 married couples from all over the United States.

In addition to the book, Rainbow has fashioned a one-act play that depicts the story of three of the couples.

The play, "Standing the Test of Time," will be performed this weekend at the Hayti Heritage Center in Durham. The production is followed by a dialogue with the audience about the play and a book signing.

During the 75-minute theatrical performance, the couples reminisce about their marriages. At one point, the women

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gather and talk about what they needed from their men. Then the men gather and talk about what they needed to stay committed to their wives.

Rainbow, 43, divorced twice herself, says she was looking for the ingredients to a good marriage.

"I didn't grow up in a family where I had an example of love and devotion," she says.

Often people imitate and adopt those behaviors they see in their home, Rainbow says. She says her parents didn't get along and often argued, even though they are still together.

So Rainbow sought couples who had gone through hardships and pain, yet still plainly felt mutual admiration.

Through her research, the author found that African-Americans were often unwilling to be vulnerable, something that can create an obstacle to building a good relationship. Black men and women often adopt behaviors that aren't authentic to be accepted in the broader community, Rainbow says.

She also believes that couples have to work at valuing each other instead of struggling over power in their relationship. Another truth she found in successful couples was that they were forgiving.

"One couple talked about infidelity in the marriage and the wife talked about how she had to pray and forgive him," Rainbow says.

The three C's

Louise and George Shipman of Durham are featured in the book. They believe the three C's have kept their marriage going for 55 years.

Being able to communicate, compromise and be considerate of each other bolstered their union, Louise Shipman says. It's also important to like the person you love, she says.

George Shipman advises couples to discuss problems and issues in the family fully and openly. "Have respect for one another's opinion and be truthful," he says.

Rainbow hopes that "Standing the Test of Time," will spark a conversation between African-American men and women. "We don't talk enough about how to get through difficult times. We don't



DETAILS

WHAT: The one-act play, "Standing the Test of Time: Love Stories of African American Elders." A book signing and discussion after the play.

WHEN: 8 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: St. Joseph's Performance Hall at the Hayti Heritage Center in Durham.

COST: \$15.

CALL: 683-1709, ext. 22.

talk enough about marriage, expectations and what makes a viable partner."

Director Hilda Willis says, "The play is important because it give us an opportunity to have a conversation with people we don't ask much of anymore. There was a time when elders stayed in the home with the family or came back to the family. But now with nursing homes, senior citizen facilities, they have been taken out of the home. We are disconnected in how we live with each other."

Looking at what worked in the past for black families is a way to nurture future relationships, Rainbow and Willis say.

"While I was in the midst of the healing process, elders imparted words of wisdom, provided shoulders to cry on and shared alternate perspectives of marriage, which were different from the narrow scopes of romantic love that I had been embracing," Rainbow wrote in her book.

Rainbow is eager for a broader audience to understand what these couples know through their living.

"This is not just a play for married people," Willis says. "Single people need to see it so they can find out some of this stuff before they choose a mate."

Staff writer Bridgette A. Lacy can be reached at 829-8925 or blacy@newsobserver.