



Kimberly Clarice Aiken

Kimberly Clarice Aiken (1976–)

Miss America, human rights advocate

When Kimberly Aiken won the title of Miss America in 1993, at the age of 18, many people wondered how the young girl would handle the crown and what she would do during her reign. Aiken, however, already knew that she wanted to use her time as Miss America to promote education and funding for the homeless, a cause she would continue to fight long after she had passed on the crown. Brought to the limelight by being the first African American to hold the title of Miss South Carolina, Aiken is now known for her endorsement of the Miss America pageant, her column

in *Pageantry Magazine*, and her continued support of the homeless.

Born to Charles and Valerie Aiken on October 11, 1976, Kimberly was immersed in a world of people who were concerned with others. Her parents ran two different services from their home in South Carolina, one a home care nursing company, the other a medical placement company, which allowed people in the medical profession to call in and locate jobs. Her uncle, who ran a food distribution center for the poor, also influenced her. Hence, it is no surprise that early on Aiken was interested in those less fortunate than herself.

Starts the Battle Against Homelessness

It was in ninth grade that Aiken was first made aware of the vast problem of homelessness. During a field trip to Washington, D.C., she says she saw people sleeping on street grates for warmth, bundling on the steps of federal buildings, and pushing carts stuffed with everything they owned. Because of her upbringing, Aiken was surprised that these people did not have at least a shelter to sleep in on cold nights. She resolved to learn more about the homeless once she returned to South Carolina. The homeless problem would become much more real for Aiken when she learned that one of her uncles was homeless after he had lost his job due to drug and alcohol abuse. It was at this point that Aiken knew she had to start getting involved in fixing the problem of homelessness.

By the age of fourteen, Aiken had already started programs in her high school aimed at combating homelessness as well as programs to educate the homeless. Aiken herself read to children who lived in shelters, teaching them to read and recognize important words and symbols. Before she turned eighteen, Aiken had founded the Homeless Education and Resource Organization (HERO), a group that raises money to assist other agencies that provide aid to the homeless. HERO also takes it upon itself to send its members out into the communities and hold free workshops and classes to educate the homeless. These classes often focus on reading, simple math skills, and other useful information on resources that can help people get off the street. Aiken told the website South Carolina African American History Online that, "My main goal is to get homeless people off the street and get people who may be homeless to not be in that situation." HERO also works in Washington, D.C., to lobby for better health care, employment facilities, and temporary housing for the homeless.

Even though Aiken was deeply devoted to the homeless during her teen years, this did not stop her from being a normal teenager. During her four years at Columbia High School, Aiken strived to be as involved as she could with the school itself, being not only a notable member of both the choir and the band, but also serving in numerous positions in

the student government. Outside of school, Aiken toured with the United States National Chorus, and she also actively pursued her career as a pageant contestant, winning various low-level circuit pageants that would eventually lead her towards the Miss South Carolina pageant. In 1992, Aiken graduated and moved on to the University of North Carolina, but only studied there for a year before transferring to the University of South Carolina in order to be nearer to her family and her pageantry.

Crowned Miss America

In early 1993, Aiken made history by becoming the first African American to ever win the title of Miss South Carolina. To many people, this was a large step towards diversity and acceptance. Aiken wasn't about to stop there however, for in September of 1993, she made her way to New Jersey to compete for the Miss America pageant. At first, it seemed that while Aiken was a presence at the pageant, that she wouldn't make the cut, not winning either the swimsuit or talent portions of the preliminary competitions. But Aiken was determined to put her best face forward and in the primary competitions wowed the audience and the judges with an amazing singing performance of the song "Summertime." The pageant itself was very close in 1993, but when the final name was called, it was Aiken who stepped forward to be crowned Miss America.

Soon after she was crowned, Aiken made it clear that she intended to use her influence as Miss America to help the homeless. Aiken's parents fully supported her, saying in *Jet* magazine, "I think that's a wonderful platform, that's a tough issue and it's a growing problem in this country, it's a growing problem in our state. We are pleased that she will use her crown to help those less fortunate." Soon after the pageant was over, Aiken began to tour the country as Miss America, and promoting education and assistance for the homeless throughout the nation. She made numerous stops in Washington, D.C., to speak on Capitol Hill about her cause, as well as to lend support to HERO as well.

Another organization that Aiken worked with during her reign was Habitat for Humanity International, a project to build and repair houses for lower income families free of charge. Aiken was no stranger to getting her hands dirty and spent a month or so building four separate houses with Habitat. Aiken promoted the idea of a preventative strike, of keeping people from becoming homeless instead of just helping them once they became homeless. In an online interview she said, "Apart from the millions of men, women, and children who live in poverty, there are countless others who are just one step away from being homeless." For her efforts, Aiken was awarded the Order of the Palmetto, the highest honor given by the state of South Carolina, as well as other various awards.

Life After The Crown

After a year, Aiken stepped down from her role as Miss America, and decided to continue her education, this time at New York University. She graduated with a degree in ac-

counting and soon was working for the accounting firm of Ernst and Young. In 1998, she married marketing executive Haven Earl Cockerham in her home state of South Carolina in a wedding that was open to the public. Soon after the wedding, Aiken switched jobs, going back to her roots in pageantry. She is currently an image consultant specializing in pageant interview preparation. She also continues to speak publicly about the issue of homelessness as well as other issues of social relevance. While she might not have the crown behind her anymore, Aiken still is a recognizable face at organizations such as HERO and Habitat for Humanity.

This doesn't mean that Aiken still does not find time for herself and her family. Aiken gave birth in 2001 to the couple's first son, Russell, and spends a great deal of time with her son and her husband at their home in Cincinnati, Ohio. In her free time, Aiken writes a regular column for *Pageantry Magazine* and is often a celebrity judge at many smaller pageants.

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Ralph G. Zerbonia

Sarah Allen (1764–1849)

Pioneer missionary, Underground Railroad operator

In an historic time when women's identities were generally recognized only in relation to that of their husbands, Sarah Allen modestly endeared herself to others as one of the most beloved and widely known religious women of the era. Allen was the second wife of Richard Allen (1760–1831), founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Philadelphia's historic black community. But it was Allen herself who created the first official role of women in the church and went on to serve in various positions in support of AME missionary work.

It is generally accepted by historians that Allen was born in 1764 in Virginia's historic county of the Isle of Wight. The Isle of Wight (named after the largest island off the coast of England) is one of the eight original "shires" or counties of

English pilgrims in colonial Virginia. Assuming as true that Allen was born there, it is also recorded that she was born into slavery. Her full name being historically recorded as “Sarah Bass Allen,” it may be that her surname prior to marriage was “Bass.” Although genealogical records from Isle of Wight give no history of the Bass surname, one of the earliest and largest land patents granted in the area was to Captain Nathaniel Basse, whose large plantation in Isle of Wight was known as “Basse’s Choice.” It is also known that the general area developed a large export and coastal trade, principally with the English colonies in the West Indies. Neither of these facts has been historically linked in any biography of Sarah Allen, and is now included only to enhance the historical perspective of the geographic area and time surrounding Allen’s birth.

In any event, it is known that Allen was brought to Philadelphia as a slave when she was approximately eight years old. It is also recorded, but by persons or devices unknown, that by 1800, Allen was a freewoman. At that time she married Richard Allen, and this fact resulted in a more detailed recorded history of her life from that time forward.

Active Church History

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) apparently had its origins along the banks of the Delaware River in 1777. Allen’s future husband Richard, a seventeen-year-old slave at the time, was quite taken with the sermon of a traveling Methodist preacher who was spreading the gospel among the slaves. Young Richard and his brother took up the faith and began converting friends and neighbors. His master, whom he described as “tenderhearted” and a “good master,” permitted Richard to invite preachers to the house, and ultimately decided that slavery was wrong. He suggested that Richard purchase his freedom (a common practice where slaves were permitted to reimburse their masters for what had been paid for their labor), and Richard was free by the time he was twenty years old. For the next several years, he traveled throughout Delaware, New York, Maryland, South Carolina and Pennsylvania, preaching to blacks and whites alike.

While preaching in Philadelphia, he evidently met Sarah, and he married her within a year of their meeting. Together, they labored to raise money to build the first black church (still preserved at Sixth and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia) from an old blacksmith shop that was purchased and moved to the church lot on Lombard Street. Apparently, they used their own money to purchase the lot. The church was named Bethel, later referred to as the Mother Bethel Church.

Allen gave birth to her first child, Richard Jr., in the year following her marriage. Five other children soon followed: James, John, Peter, Sara, and Ann. Raising six children was more than a full time job for Allen, but she also ran the entire household, managed the resources, and maintained the home atmosphere that her husband and other preachers need to support their ministry. (Son Richard Jr. later became active in the church as well, serving as secretary of the first annual conference.)

Meanwhile, the evangelical work of the Allens ultimately resulted in the formation of other churches for blacks in other cities, including Baltimore, Salem, Wilmington, and Attleboro, Pennsylvania. In 1816 these churches were united to form the AME Church, and Richard Allen was consecrated the first bishop.

When the struggling new AME Church held its first annual conference in Philadelphia, Sarah Allen was dismayed by the physical condition of the weary returning ministers her husband had sent out to travel and preach. They were tired, often weak, frail, and bedraggled. According to church documents and histories, the worn and shabby clothing of the preachers was in such poor condition that Allen later described the men as having “ventilators in their trousers.” She set out to mobilize other wives in the church to help her with the mending of clothes for the men. They worked all night to repair and sew special homespun cloth into new jackets and trousers.

Thus began the tradition that Allen would later become renowned for. Allen’s husband originally referred to her and her fellow women helpers as the “Dorcas Society” (after Dorcas, the Christian disciple). (Many church denominations have their own “Dorcas Society,” which generally refers to a women’s auxiliary group that is engaged in clothing and feeding the poor). However, Allen’s efforts initially remained directed internally toward preparing good meals, repairing garments, and improving the appearance of AME pastors. After continuing these efforts in preparation for several annual conferences, in 1827 Allen formally organized the women as the “Daughters of Conference.” From that time, the women assumed official church responsibilities for providing material improvements and nourishment for the ministers assigned to their annual conferences. Long after Allen’s death, the Daughters of Conference continued to help supplement the ministers’ meager salaries with their meals and clothing repairs to help insure the survival of the church clergy.

Characterized by those who knew her as “a pillar [of] the building, a mother in Israel,” the beloved Allen was eventually honored as the first woman missionary of the church. She formalized and expanded women’s roles in church activities to include caring for needy persons outside the ranks of the clergy. With this objective in mind, she founded what became known as the Women’s Missionary Society. The women of the Missionary Society maintained a form of children’s daycare school during the daytime hours, and helped organize adult classes at night to help educate their church members. They also cooked meals, mended garments, and gathered donated clothes for the needy. Their contribution to the growth and stability of the church as an institution cannot be underestimated, for not only did they administer to the material needs of the community, but also to the good will and spiritual good of all.

Link to the Underground Railroad

Concurrent with these church activities, Sarah and Richard Allen played important roles in what would later become known as the Underground Railroad. Philadelphia was along

the main route of the network of protective houses and havens that connected the southern and southeastern states to free areas in the north and in Canada. As far back as 1795, the AME Church had been used to hide and help thirty runaway Jamaican slaves. Later, Allen and her husband would hide, feed, and clothe runaway slaves in their own home as well as the church basement. They solicited and collected large sums of money to facilitate the fugitive slaves' continued journey, or help them settle in the Philadelphia area. Some modern day members of the Mother Bethel AME Church are direct descendants of those slaves who were assisted by Allen, her husband, and other community members.

Allen remained involved in church missionary work even after her husband died in 1831. Fortunately, she was left with sufficient funds to insure that her need for employment after his death would be unnecessary. Her love of the church and the church community continued to nourish her own soul until the end. She died in Philadelphia at the home of her youngest daughter, Ann Adams, in 1849, at the age of eighty-five. She was interred, along with her husband, in a tomb in the lower level of the Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia. The Church (a restored building sits on the original site) remains one of the key points of interest during tours of Philadelphia's historic districts.

The modern day AME Church has more than a million members worldwide and eighteen active bishops in the clergy. The church's Daughters of Conference continue to support and organize the annual conference of church clergy. The Sarah Allen Women's Missionary society has also flourished over the years, It continues to promote fellowship with women of other lands and to foster missionary activities in the local churches as well as the overseas church communities through physical and spiritual nourishment, The society is particularly recognized for distributing food baskets to the needy at Thanksgiving and Christmas and for sponsoring food and clothing drives year round.

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Lauri Harding

Tina McElroy Ansa (1949–)

Writer

Author of four novels, Tina McElroy Ansa has successfully established herself as a noted author of a distinct literary style that incorporates both the African-American and the Southern experience. Through her characters, Ansa paints intricate pictures of family and community relationships that emphasize the importance of the voices of past generations. Following the release of her fourth novel, *The Hand I Fan With*, in March 2002, Ansa's next project is to serve as executive director of the film version of her first novel, *Baby of the Family*, which she and her husband have adapted into a screenplay.

The youngest of five children, Ansa was born on November 18, 1949, in Macon, Georgia, to Walter J. and Nellie (Lee) McElroy. Her father was a business owner and her mother was a teacher's assistant. As the only girl and also the baby of the family, growing up Ansa received a lot of attention and love from her older brothers as well as her parents. She developed a love for storytelling and reading early in her life. Her grandfather recounted stories sitting on the front porch, and when her favorite uncle visited, he would entertain the entire family with his storytelling. As a child, she would wonder about the people who frequented her father's downtown juke joint, and create fictional accounts of what their lives must be like.

After graduating from Mount DeSales, a Catholic high school in Macon, Ansa enrolled in Spelman College, the historically black women's college in Atlanta, Georgia, and earned a B.A. in English in 1971. She then became the first black woman to be hired by *The Atlanta Constitution*. During her eight years with the newspaper, Ansa worked in a variety of positions, including copy editor, makeup editor, layout editor, entertainment writer, feature writer and news reporter. In the late 1970s, Ansa also worked as a copy editor and editor for the *Charlotte Observer*, in Charlotte, North Carolina. On May 1, 1978, Ansa married Joneé Ansa, a videographer and filmmaker. As Ansa was establishing herself as a novelist, she worked as a freelance writer and journalist and taught writing workshops at Brunswick College, Emory University, and Spelman College.

Establishes Writing Career

During the first six years of their marriage, the couple relocated several times before moving to St. Simon Island, off the coast of Georgia, in 1984. Ansa, who first visited St. Simon Island on her honeymoon, fell in love with the quaint black community, founded by former slaves, which could trace its roots back to the late seventeenth century. During her nearly two decades of residence there, Ansa has found her adopted home to be an inspiration. She wrote in *Essence*, "A

pity all strangers are not treated as lovingly as I have been on this island. I am in good company. I am home.” Her love for the Georgia coast inspired her first publication, *Not Soon Forgotten: Cotton Planters and Plantations of the Golden Isles of Georgia*, published by the Georgia Coastal Historical Society in 1987.

Ansa published her first major work in 1989. *Baby of the Family* set the tone for Ansa’s literary style. A distinctly Southern writer, she approaches the black Southern experience from the perspective of a middle-class woman raised in the segregated South. Void of the socially dysfunctional context present in the writings of other Southern authors such as Flannery O’Connor, Ansa focuses on family and community relationships by setting all her stories in the microcosm of the fictional town of Mulberry, Georgia. Creating an economically and socially self-sufficient black community, Ansa is able to explore the internal forces in the lives of her characters. Drawing on folklore and stories of spiritual presence, Ansa builds characters who are acutely aware of their presence, albeit temporary, in a world that is also inhabited by the ghosts, spirits, and the legacies of those who had passed through the community’s history.

Baby of the Family tells the coming-of-age story of Lena McPherson, who like Ansa, was born in the 1940s in middle Georgia. Also like Ansa, Lena was born with a caul, a part of the inner membrane containing the fetus, covering her eyes, which according to folk tradition imparts psychic powers. The nurse carefully preserves the caul and makes a special tea from the caul for Lena to drink that will protect her from the frightful visions that would follow. Not knowing the purpose of the ritual, Lena’s mother, Nellie, burns the caul and waters a nearby plant with the tea. Nellie, named after Ansa’s own mother, considers herself a modern woman of reason and practicality and initially disregards her daughter’s special abilities as purely superstitious. Soon, however, her mother must come to acknowledge her daughter’s special abilities. Lena sees ghosts, children in portraits reach out to her, and ghosts of slave women walk the beach with her. Admired by some and feared by others, Lena’s powers lead to a life of isolation and confusion—she is different. With her mother’s encouragement, Lena tries unsuccessfully to create a normal life by ignoring the ghosts that confront her, bringing her only closer to the edge of her own sanity. Only when she is able to acknowledge she is a child of both the superstitious past and the modern, rational present does Lena come to a sense of self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Essence noted in a review of *Baby of the Family*, “Ansa skillfully draws us into Lena’s world through evocative prose laced, nevertheless, with a good deal of humor. The novel’s wide acclaim just goes to show that Ansa... was on the right track with her childhood storytelling.” In 1989, *Baby of the Family* was named as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and as the American Library Association’s Best Book for Young Adults.

Ansa’s second novel, *Ugly Ways*, published in 1993, explores the complex interplay in the relationship between mothers and daughters. Believing that black mothers had been stereotyped as strong and supportive, Ansa wrote the book as

a means to discover the dynamics in a family where the mother is not strong nor supportive, but rather manipulative and controlling. The story, which once again takes place in fictitious Mulberry, centers on the three Lovejoy sisters, Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth, who return to their childhood home to attend the funeral of their mother, Mudear. Each bears emotional scars from their childhood under the domineering and demanding mother, who kept both herself and her daughters cut off from the outside world. As they plan the funeral, the sisters reflect on the outrageous and often emotionally painful actions of their mother. The story’s depth expands by the continuing presence of Mudear’s spirit, which hovers about her daughters and frequently comments on the women’s conversations about her.

Betty, the oldest, has remained in Mulberry and continued to serve her mother’s needs and whims. She builds a successful business as a hairdresser, but remains emotionally isolated from everyone in the community but her sisters. Emily, divorced and contemplating suicide, has found no grounding for her life as she laments her deprivation of a loving mother during her childhood. Ruth Ann, a successful television news anchor, has suffered a nervous breakdown on the air and been hospitalized. Seemingly the most fragile, Ruth Ann becomes the sister who is determined to confront her dead mother and reclaim control over her life. Told in the Southern literary style that elegantly combines humor and hurt, Ansa paints a comic picture as Ruth Ann seeks out her mother’s casket at the funeral home with her sisters in pursuit, only to interrupt two different wrong funerals. Finally finding her mother, in the mayhem of her outburst and her sisters’ attempts to restrain her, the casket is knocked from its portable gurney, the three women fall, and Mudear’s body is dislodged. In the chaos of familiar forms broken, the three women finally confront their mother.

Ugly Ways is a stark look at the antithesis of the strong, determined, protective, and loving African–American mother. Although the sisters almost seem to hold some sense of admiration for their mother’s ability to sustain such a singularly independent existence, Mudear is given no redeeming qualities. Ansa explained the character to *Essence* by saying, “Mudear is a force unto herself. She is a woman who formed herself out of her own experiences. She is selfish and insensitive and has no real barometer inside her to tell her that her behavior is hurtful to her children. Yet she is universal in that sense that everybody knows a Mudear.” Widely read, *Ugly Ways* reached the top of the African American Best Sellers/Blackboard list and stayed on the list for more than two years. It also appeared on the bestseller lists of *Quarterly Black Review of Books* and *African American Literary Review*.

Ansa’s third novel, *The Hand I Fan With*, published in 1997, returns once again to Mulberry and revisits the life of Lena McPherson, now a forty-five-year-old successful real estate agent. Still in possession of her psychic gifts, Lena has become the cornerstone of Mulberry. She is in constant service to others to help them financially, emotionally, and physically. In return “her people,” as they are called, provide her with their admiration and gratitude, yet often her help is taken for granted. Consequently, Lena has remained through-

out her life in emotional isolation. With her parents and two brothers already dead, she is alone, and her struggle to come to terms with the spirits that surround her continues unabated.

Lena's friend, Sister, becomes deeply worried about her emotional state. Preparing to leave town for a year-long research project, Sister convinces Lena to conjure up a man to take care of her. The result of the conjuring ceremony the two perform results in the later appearance of Herman, a man dead over one hundred years and pleased to once again be in human form. Herman stays with Lena for exactly one year, during which time he becomes her lover, her support, and her adviser. Herman teaches Lena to lay claim to her own life, to stop worrying about social expectations, and to come to terms with herself. At the end of their relationship, which has been both erotic and spiritual, Herman leaves Lena, but she is comforted by the knowledge that his spirit will continue to surround her. With new recognition for the first time in her life, Lena invites in the spirit voices that have haunted her, which then fill her house with happy sounds and conversations of her dead friends and relatives. As a result, Lena refocuses her life, stops playing the role of divine intervener for the community, and creates a safehouse for runaway teenagers. As the townspeople gossip that perhaps she has lost her mind, Lena discovers a redemptive presence of peace and belonging for the first time.

You Know Better, published in 2002, focuses on three women in the Pines: teenager LaShawndra, her mother Sandra and her grandmother Lily Paine. Once again set in Mulberry, the location that Ansa has suggested she will spend her entire literary career on, *You Know Better* deals with the reclamation of today's youth and the struggle to bridge family and generational gaps. LaShawndra is a rebellious eighteen-year-old who consistently finds herself in trouble. Carefree and irresponsible, LaShawndra lives for fun and avoiding the consequences of her behavior. Her mother, Sandra, a successful real estate agent, has little time in her busy and complicated life to chase after her daughter who run off to avoid repercussions from her most recent troubles. It is her grandmother, Lily Paine, a former schoolteacher and pillar of the Mulberry community, who seeks out LaShawndra in the midnight hours. Over the course of a three-day holiday weekend each of the women finds guidance from a different ghost, Miss Moses, Nurse Joanna Bloom, and Miss Elizabeth Dryer. Through their experiences and the wisdom of their spiritual visitors, the women are led to acknowledge the pain they have each caused the other and thus are able to move toward reconciliation and healing.

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Kari Bethel

Martina Arroyo

(1936–)

Opera singer

As one of the first black female performers to gain notoriety in opera in the 1950s and 60s, Martina Arroyo was indeed a trailblazer. During this time, she gained a reputation across the world as one of the most talented and beloved sopranos in the history of opera. In addition, she has also done her part to cultivate the future of opera by teaching students at a variety of universities and conferences.

Martina Arroyo was born on February 2, 1936, in a diverse Harlem neighborhood. Her father, Demetrio Arroyo, was an immigrant from Puerto Rico and her mother, Lucille Washington, was a black woman who grew up in Charleston, South Carolina. Arroyo had one brother, who would later go on to become a minister, who was sixteen years her senior. Demetrio Arroyo worked as a mechanical engineer and was able to bring home a salary that allowed his wife to stay home while the family enjoyed a comfortable existence. The family was interested in the arts and often made their way to Manhattan to take in the city's more cosmopolitan offerings.

she was referred to as Mother Theodore. “Lissner had the plans and the permission for a new congregation,” wrote Cyprian Davis in *Black Women in America*, “Williams had the charisma, the courage, and the inspiration to found the congregation and to sustain it.” This dynamic became more and more obvious as Father Lissner’s visits became infrequent and eventually stopped. Williams suddenly found herself in charge of the growth of the convent. Through these difficult years, Williams earned the respect of her community. The sisters described her as a woman of courage, strong faith and solid determination.

From the beginning, the Handmaids worked to serve the poor and provide education, but without the restrictions on whites teaching blacks their primary mission in Georgia was removed. At the invitation of Cardinal Hayes, Williams ended the seven year struggle to keep the convent in Savannah and decided to move the order to Harlem in New York City in 1922.

With the move to Harlem, the community of the Handmaids experienced a rebirth. By 1925, there were sixteen members, eventually including women from the West Indies and the Virgin Islands. The order continued to make teaching a priority, but also provided childcare and served the poor. They opened a soup kitchen for the indigent and a nursery that provided childcare for the working poor. By 1926, they took responsibility for the parochial school and St. Benedict of the Moor parish in lower Manhattan and later came to staff Harlem’s grammar school, St. Aloysius Parrish. In 1929, the community became affiliated with the Franciscan Order and changed their name to the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary.

Williams died on July 14, 1931, at age sixty-three. Although her leadership had been critical to the formation of the order, the convent continued their work in her absence. Over time, the community added hours to their childcare, offered a kindergarten, and a summer camp. The motherhouse remained in Harlem, but a separate novitiate opened on Staten Island, as well as a mission in South Carolina. The Catholic Diocese of Savannah celebrated the Handmaids’ seventy-fifth anniversary in 1992, hosting current members to an African-American Catholic Reflection Weekend. They were honored for their dedication and continued hard work, especially on behalf of African-American communities. The eighty-fifth anniversary of the order was marked with a benefit gospel concert and a mass in 2001. The small, but dedicated order continued as a vital member of the African-American community, performing work in the spirit of their founders into the twenty-first century.

It would be difficult to consider the life of Mother Theodore apart from her work. Her life was totally committed to God and the Catholic church. But it’s important to note the courage and unwavering commitment with which she approached her calling and to realize the groundbreaking achievement of being a black woman in the 1920s who guided an entire religious community through its formation. One can never know how many young African Americans became educated because of this one woman’s efforts, nor how far into the future her influence will be felt.

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Janet Ingram

Serena Williams (1981–)

Athlete, professional tennis player

Serena Williams has made a name for herself in the competitive world of professional tennis, becoming the first African-American woman to win the U.S Open in 40 years, and establishing herself as a fierce competitor. She and her sister Venus have pushed the status quo in the world of tennis, breaking numerous records and steadily climbing the rankings to the top.

Serena Williams was born on September 16, 1981, in Saginaw, Michigan. When Serena was three, their father, Richard, finally decided it was time to begin teaching his two youngest daughters tennis, and he took Serena and Venus to the rundown, weedy tennis courts nearby in Compton, California, where the family had moved after Serena’s birth. Serena recalls getting very jealous and upset when Venus and her father would go to practice and leave her behind. But by the time she was five, she and Venus were consistently practicing against each other, in what Serena has described as “nuclear war.”

When Venus was ten, she was becoming a force to be reckoned with in Southern California tennis. Serena was always the first to support her sister, but she was developing a reputation of her own. While Venus was the number one player in Southern California in the girls’ 12-and-under division, Serena was the top-ranked girl in the Southern California 10-and-under division.



Serena Williams

Just as Serena and Venus were ruling Southern California's tennis scene, their parents decided that the sport was taking too much time, so the girls stopped playing tennis on the junior circuit. This unprecedented act drew criticism from those in the tennis establishment, because the junior events were seen as an absolute requirement to becoming a professional. Their father thought the girls should concentrate on school. Their mother, Oracene, wanted the girls to be balanced and humble. Neither parent wanted the girls' lives to center around tennis without also being able to concentrate on education, family, and hobbies, such as basketball, music, and reading.

When Serena was about nine years old, Richard Williams convinced tennis coach Rick Macci, who ran a tennis school in Florida, to come to Compton to see his daughters practice. Macci flew to Compton and went to the rundown, cracked tennis courts of East Rancho Dominguez Park and hit balls with the girls. Although Macci was at first unimpressed with both girls during his first hour of hitting, he suddenly became interested when he saw Venus walk off the court on her hands and begin doing back flips. He started the girls on competitive drills, and both instantly shined with focused, aggressive intensity. After Macci offered both girls a scholarship to his tennis academy and gave the family free housing, the entire family moved to Florida. Beginning in 1991, the girls endured six-hour practices for six days a week. Every swing Serena took on the court was watched by a coach and

critiqued. During this period, Serena did not play junior tournaments. Richard wanted to keep pressure off the girls, and he and Macci were thinking beyond the junior circuit.

To the Pros at Fourteen

Serena Williams turned professional at fourteen, just like Venus had a year before. In 1995, she began her professional career in a small tournament. Her debut gained little attention, as opposed to the media blitz that swirled around Venus's first tournament, but it did not bother Serena. With her father citing the need to concentrate on schoolwork, however, Serena would not play in another professional tournament through 1995 and 1996.

Even playing a limited tournament schedule, Serena's ranking was on the rise. In the 1997 Ameritech Cup in Chicago, she beat two top-ten players, Monica Seles and Mary Pierce, until finally losing in the semifinals to Lindsay Davenport. Nonetheless, Serena saw this tournament as a turning point for her professional career, as the rankings proved. After the tournament, her world ranking jumped from 304 to 100. Serena's ranking in the top one hundred allowed her to enter her first Grand Slam singles match at the Australian Open. With her performance at the Ameritech Cup, she became the lowest-ranked player in the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) Tour history to beat two top-ten players in the same tournament. By March 1998, Serena would soar to 30th in the world. This was a huge accomplishment, given she had started March 1997 at 453.

Sister vs. Sister

In 1998, both sisters advanced to the second round of the Australian Open, where the bracket brought them head on. Several players on the tour, including Lindsay Davenport and Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, were predicting Serena would come out on top and finally overtake her older sister. However, the showdown was somewhat lackluster, with Venus beating Serena 7-6 (7-4), 6-1 in a match filled with double-faults, unforced errors, and difficulties holding serve.

The sisters would get to demonstrate that they were still a team soon thereafter when they won their first career women's doubles title in March 1998 at the IGA Tennis Classic in Oklahoma City, defeating Catalina Cristea and Kristine Kunce 7-5, 6-2. With the victory, Serena became the youngest winner in IGA Tennis Classic History, beating out her sister, who had set the record a few days earlier in winning the singles title. In May 1998, with Serena ranked 31st, the sisters would meet again in the Italian Open, and Venus would win in another unexciting match 6-4, 6-2.

Wimbledon that year also found the young women on the cusp of meeting again in the fourth round, but Serena had to retire from her third-round match after an injury. However, after a few days of recovery, Serena won the Wimbledon mixed doubles title with partner Max Mirnyi, giving Serena her first Grand Slam title. Serena was voted the WTA's Most Impressive Newcomer in 1998 and named Rookie of the Year.

In early 1999, Serena became a part of history. As part of their father's strategy, the sisters had begun to play far away from each other in different tournaments, so as to not disrupt the other's game. In February 1999, Serena won her first WTA Tour title at the Open Gaz de France in Paris, 6–2, 3–6, 7–6, against Amelie Mauresmo of France. Thousands of miles away in Oklahoma City, Venus beat Amanda Coetzer in the championships of the IGA Superthrift Tennis Classic. They became the first two siblings to win championships in any sport on the same day.

The history books were again rewritten just a month later at the 1999 Lipton Championships in Key Biscayne. After beating Martina Hingis for the first time in her career, Serena faced Venus in the finals. It was the first time sisters had met in a major final since 1884. With her father holding up a white board announcing "Welcome to the Williams Show," Venus again defeated Serena 6–1, 4–6, 6–4, in an ugly game full of unforced errors. A few months later, the sisters beat Martina Hingis and Anna Kournikova for the doubles title at the French Open. It was another page for the history books, as they were the first sisters to win a doubles title in a Grand Slam tournament.

In the 1999 U.S. Open, Serena Williams needed three sets to beat Monica Seles in the quarterfinals. Serena overcame Lindsay Davenport to earn a trip to the finals. In the final, Serena beat Martina Hingis in straight sets, becoming the first African-American woman to win the crown since Althea Gibson in 1958. She cried as she clutched the trophy, but she hardly had time to celebrate. Later the same day, she and Venus won the doubles tournament.

Serena finally beat her sister in 1999 at a German tournament, firmly establishing a number-four ranking at the end of the 1999 year. Serena took off the end of 1999 to attend fashion college in Florida.

Serena won her first singles title of 2000 at the Faber Grand Prix, followed up by another title at the Princess Cup. After another loss to Venus at the 2000 Wimbledon final, the two would pair up for the Sydney Olympics, winning the gold in doubles. Serena called her 2000 tennis season a "very bad year," after getting sidelined for more than two months in the spring with an injury.

Serena won her first title of 2001 at Indian Wells, California, despite the controversy over her sister withdrawing from their match in the semifinals. The sisters met again at the 2001 U.S. Open in September. Leading up to the finals, Venus and Serena made the cover of *Time* magazine. After only an hour of play, Venus again defeated Serena, 6–2, 6–4. For the 2001 season, Serena pocketed over \$2 million in prize money. She ended 2001 by carrying the Olympic torch during the 2002 Olympic Torch Relay in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. In March 2002, after recovering from an ankle sprain, Serena defeated Jennifer Capriati in the State Farm Women's Tennis Classic, bumping her up to number six in the world, with Venus number one.

Serena climbed to the number one spot in the rankings after superlative performances in the first half of 2002. She

won the French Open and Wimbledon, defeated her sister in finals of both tournaments. After her Wimbledon triumph, Serena had won 19 straight matches, a personal best, and won five tournaments overall. Serena and Venus also continued their doubles team success, winning the Wimbledon finals in that event also.

Outside the White Lines

Serena Williams has used her tennis celebrity to reach out to inner-city youth. In 1996, she served as a mentor for middle and high school students as part of the Palm Beach County Urban League's program, Doing the Right Thing. Through the program, Serena met with students and emphasized education, school attendance, and volunteer work. She encourages kids to read and enjoys reading herself. Her favorite author is Maya Angelou.

Serena Williams is a devout Jehovah's Witness. Even with fame and her busy life, she still finds religion important, followed by family and education. Although part of being a Jehovah's Witness is witnessing to strangers, doing so has been admittedly more difficult since Serena has become more of a public figure. Instead of talking about her faith, those she speaks to want to ask about tennis.

Serena Williams is very competitive. Venus has called Serena a "kind of perfectionist." However, it is clear both are very competitive. During the 1998 Australian Open, Serena and Venus challenged a male player, Karsten Braasch, 203rd in the world, to single-set matches. Playing informally on an empty court at the complex, Serena lost 6–1 and Venus lost 6–2. Serena commented that she would defeat him the next year after she did some weight training.

Although Serena seemed to live in the shadow of her older sister at the beginning of their careers, the two soon became known for their distinct personalities. While Venus grabs headlines by her apparent brashness and arrogance, Serena comes across as amiable and charismatic. Her mother says that Serena has had to work harder for her successes in life, as opposed to Venus, to whom good grades and tennis came easily. But their mother says that because of this, Serena has a more tenacious, unrelenting quality. Her father says that Serena's tennis game is different than Venus's in that she has developed more finesse shots and placement skills, rather than depending on sheer power and speed, Venus's strong points. The sisters' bodies are also very different. Venus has a tall, lean build, while Serena's five-foot-ten-inch-body is stockier, solid, and muscular.

In 1995, the young sisters teamed up to start the Venus and Serena Williams Tutorial/Tennis Academy. The Los Angeles academy delivers educational and tennis programs, including an after-school program, summer tennis camp, youth outreach program, mentoring program, and cultural enrichment program. With such wide-ranging interests, talents, and hobbies, there is little doubt that Serena Williams has fulfilled her father's wishes for her to be a well-rounded adult.

In 2002, Serena once again faced her sister Venus in the U.S. Open finals. Serena ranked #1, proved herself once again by defeating Venus in the finals.

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Thomas W. Scholl



Vanessa L. Williams

profile film and television acting career. All of this has not come easily, as Williams has had to deal with private and public turmoil along the way. But because she always manages to land on her feet, Williams is considered not only one of the most versatile entertainers in recent history, but one of the most determined as well.

Vanessa Lynne Williams was born on March 18, 1963, in New York City, to Milton and Helen Williams. Her parents were music teachers who both taught privately and in schools. The family, which also included a son named Christopher, enjoyed an upper-middle class lifestyle, and both Williams and her brother received extensive musical training from their parents. Over time, Williams would become proficient in a multitude of instruments including the piano, French horn, and violin. In addition, she also was an excellent singer. By junior high and high school, Williams would become interested in acting, and would go on to star in numerous school plays while receiving a Presidential Scholarship for Drama. Williams’ mother was proud of her accomplishments, but always reminded her of the troubles that young black women often faced. “You have to try twice as hard as other people, just to break even,” Helen Williams recalled telling her daughter in *The Black Collegian*.

Vanessa L. Williams (1963–)

Singer, actress, beauty queen

As the first African-American to be crowned Miss America, Vanessa L. Williams made history. Unfortunately, a scandalous secret from her past also forced her to become the first young woman in the pageant’s history to resign her crown, threatening to destroy her promising entertainment career in the process. But like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Williams began to reinvent herself and before she knew it, she had a string of successful albums and concert tours, a critically acclaimed show on Broadway, and a high-

After high school, Williams decided to attend Syracuse University, where her good looks and natural theatrical talent attracted the attention of the director of the Miss Greater Syracuse Pageant. The director asked her to enter the contest, but at first Williams seemed uninterested. But when she learned that part of the prizes awarded to winner included scholarship money, she changed her mind. In 1983, Williams would not only be crowned Miss Greater Syracuse, but Miss New York State as well. Her next stop would be the famed Miss America Pageant.

There She Is

The Miss America Pageant of 1983 will always be remembered as a breakthrough in the name of racial equality. In addition to Williams, there were three other African-American contestants: Amy Keys of Maryland, North Carolina's Deneen Graham, and the woman who would eventually go on to be the first-runner up, Suzette Charles from New Jersey. At the time, this was the highest number of black contestants in one year for the pageant. To Williams, this was a non-issue. "Ideally, a black Miss America could be a role model for all young women in America, not just minorities," she told *People Weekly*.

The benefits to being crowned Miss America were all too obvious to Williams. In addition to the \$25,000 in scholarship money, there was also the chance to earn upwards of \$100,000 in endorsement and personal appearance fees. Williams wowed the judges with her poise, beauty, intelligence and talent, including an original singing performance of the standard 'Happy Days Are Again.' When the crown was finally awarded to her, she seemed to understand the historical importance of the moment.

Almost immediately, the public would become divided over this history-making event. On one hand, black people would celebrate it as a defining moment for their race, while radical whites would protest it and even go as far as to threaten Williams' life. Still, there was another group of African-Americans who would criticize Williams because her skin was too light, her hair was too straight, her eyes were the wrong color and her upbringing was too privileged. In short, they felt that Williams was not black enough, and therefore not a true representation of their race. Meanwhile, Williams ignited further controversy by expressing her views on abortion and other difficult issues that conflicted with her Catholic background. Still, Williams took all this in stride and always put on a happy face for her numerous personal appearances. "I don't believe the fact that I am black has anything to do with my qualifications to be Miss America. I'm making waves and I'm ready to handle it. I'm ready for whatever crisis I have to face," she remarked in *People Weekly*. Ultimately, those words would prove to be prophetic.

There She Goes

In July of 1984, with just two short months left in her reign as Miss America, Williams' life would be turned upside down. Two years earlier, when Williams was a freshman at Syracuse University, she had taken a job as a secretary and

makeup artist for a photographer named Tom Chiapel and during this time she had made several poor decisions. It seemed that Chiapel had gotten Williams to pose nude in a series of black and white photographs. Several featured her in leather bondage gear, while others were of a naked Williams and another woman together in suggestive poses that suggested lesbianism. The photos had fallen into the hands of Bob Guccione, the publisher of *Penthouse* magazine, who had plans to feature them in an upcoming issue, but not after Hugh Hefner, the publisher of *Playboy*, turned them down first. Later Hefner would explain why in *People Weekly*. "Vanessa Williams is a beautiful woman. There was never any question of our interest in the photos. But they clearly weren't authorized and because they would be the source of considerable embarrassment to her, we decided not to publish them. We were also mindful that she was the first black Miss America."

When Miss America officials learned of this situation, they were upset to say the least. The pageant had strict rules about such things and they apparently felt deceived because Williams failed to disclose this information to them beforehand. Upon hearing the news, Pageant Chairman Albert Marks Jr. called on Williams to resign her crown within seventy-two hours. He later stated in *People Weekly* his disgust with the situation. "As a man, a father, a grandfather, as a human being, I have never seen anything like these photographs. Ugh. I can't even show them to my wife."

In the meantime, Williams was weighing her options and getting legal advice about what to do next. She felt bad for her family, telling *The Black Collegian* "When I told my parents, those were uncontrollable tears. I told them I was sorry. Because of mistakes...I was going to cause them a lot of sadness." Williams blamed a youthful naivete for her actions and claimed that Chiapel had deceived her, promising never to release the pictures and even telling her that he had destroyed them along with the negatives. In addition, she insisted that she had never signed a release form for the photographs to be published. Bob Guccione disagreed and claimed to have the appropriate form with Williams' signature (which was analyzed by several handwriting experts) as proof. "I would never publish a photograph of a girl without a release. Otherwise, they would take me to the cleaners," he told *People Weekly*. Williams seemed to have that sentiment in mind and retaliated by threatening to sue the publisher for \$400 million, but later relented when she realized that she was fighting a losing battle. On July 23, 1984, Williams resigned her title well within Albert Marks' timeframe and Suzette Charles was called up to fulfill the remainder of Williams' duties for the next seven weeks. Upon stepping down, Williams was quoted in *People Weekly* at her press conference: "I am not a person who gives up...It has never been my desire to injure the Miss America Pageant...I must relinquish my title." Still, Williams walked away with her scholarship money, appearance fees, and the actual crown, but was forced to surrender her endorsement deals, including lucrative opportunities with the Gillette company and Kellogg's. A contract to write her autobiography was also torn up.

In the end, it seemed that the only winner in the whole messy situation was Bob Guccione. The issue of *Penthouse* that featured Williams' photos would go on to be a complete sell-out, making Guccione over \$4 million more than he did for an average month of magazine sales. Still, Guccione felt that the incident could benefit Williams in the long run. "I can't give you the name of a single former Miss America, and beautiful women are my business. Okay, Bess Myerson comes to mind. But Vanessa Williams will never be forgotten," he stated in *People Weekly*.

Williams Starts Over

With her career at a crossroads, Williams turned to her family, legal team and publicist Ramon Hervey II for advice. Hervey would prove to play an instrumental part in her rebirth, offering her words of encouragement and telling her to focus on what got her noticed in the first place: her talent. Williams responded, by concentrating on her singing career and landing parts in movies like *The Pick-Up Artist* and *Under the Gun*. In the process, Williams and Hervey fell in love and were married in January of 1987. The couple moved to Hollywood, California, soon thereafter. Later that year, Williams and Hervey would have their first child, a daughter named Melanie Lynne.

By 1988, Williams had recorded her first album, entitled *The Right Stuff*. The record was released to critical and public acclaim and rocketed up the charts. The album's title track and another song, "He's Got the Look," became top-five smashes and Williams received three Grammy Award nominations for her efforts. This high-profile comeback earned Williams a NAACP Award for Best New Artist and led to a gig as a co-host on the television special *Showtime at the Apollo*. Williams could not be happier about her turnaround, telling *Ebony* her feelings about her past: "I'm just moving on, for there is nothing I can do to change that, so I just have to deal with it and move on. If situations arose where I could get revenge, I absolutely would. But at this point, success is the best revenge."

Over the next few years, Williams would appear in films like *Harley Davidson and the Marlboro Man*, as well as television movies like "Stompin' At the Savoy" and "The Jacksons: An American Story." In 1991, she released her sophomore album, *The Comfort Zone*, which yielded the number one song "Save the Best for Last" and other solid tracks like "Work to Do." The same year Williams and Hervey had another daughter, Jillian, followed by a son, Devin, in 1993. These two additions prompted the family to move back to New York to be closer to Williams' family.

A big breakthrough for Williams came in 1994, when she landed the title role in the Broadway production of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. "It's a fantastic role for me because I get a chance to do a little drama, a little comedy, a lot of dancing and a lot of singing. I enjoy playing characters. It's a lot easier for me to delve into character and perform as somebody else," she stated in *Jet*. Also in 1994, Williams released her third album, *The Sweetest Days*, which included the hit songs

'Betcha Never' and 'You Can't Run.' The album title seemed to be a direct statement about Williams' happiness and life philosophy. With her string of successes, she was finally able to put her controversial past behind her and be judged strictly for her talent. "These are my sweetest days. Absolutely. I think with three wonderful kids, a beautiful, hard-working marriage and having a career that I'm in almost full control of, is certainly the best time for me," she told *Jet*. Things certainly seemed that way as Williams' hot streak continued when she performed the Academy Award winning song 'Color of the Wind' on the soundtrack for Disney's *Pocohantas*.

Continues to Grow

Unfortunately, Williams' happy times were not without some painful ones. In 1996, she and Hervey decided to divorce. This decision was complicated, but in the end, Williams felt it was all for the best. "At first, I felt relieved, sad, and lonely, then peaceful, settled, strong, and optimistic," she told *Cosmopolitan*. "I was looking forward to a life that was drama-free, to getting out of the anxiety and hell I was going through. The toughest part was thinking I'd be viewed as a failure, knowing that it was going to be hard on me and my family. It takes a lot of courage to follow your heart," she added. Williams continued to move on with her career, costarring with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the action film *Eraser*. Williams and Schwarzenegger hit it off on the set of the film and realized that they had a lot in common. "Arnold said to me, 'Your career is very similar to mine because people didn't take us seriously at first. They knew us for our bodies, Mr. Universe and Miss America, and they had no idea what we really wanted to do with our lives, so they wrote us off. You showed them that you have guts.' And he admired that, because he loves strong women," Williams recalled in *Ebony*.

After *Eraser*, Williams would continue to be seen in films like *Soul Food*, *Hoodlum* and the remake of *Shaft* with Samuel L. Jackson. She would also release more music including the 1997 album *Next*. But Williams seemed to derive the most happiness from her three children. She immersed herself in their lives and took joy in performing normal motherly chores like carpooling and attending music recitals. She had little time for romance. A relationship with screenwriter Christopher Solimine, whom she met while filming the television miniseries "The Odyssey," was short-lived. At the time, Williams told *Ebony*, "In my personal life, I just want less drama. I want someone who is going to cherish me. That's what I'm looking for."

Finds New Love

Williams would soon get her wish. In 1998 she met basketball player Rick Fox. A star with the Los Angeles Lakers, Fox had been a fan of Williams for some time and had admitted to friends and family that he had a secret crush on the entertainer. "She was my first representation of a Black American woman. I never thought I might marry her one day.

I was really just a fan who appreciated her music and her work,” Fox told *Essence*. He continued: “She was a strong, beautiful, American woman. I thought if that’s what America had to offer, I hoped to someday marry someone like that.” The couple had a few chance meetings, including one at Fox’s birthday party, and soon their romance began to bloom. Fox pursued her relentlessly and despite Williams’ apprehensions towards relationships and the fact that Fox was six years younger than her, things began to move forward.

By 1999, Williams and Fox were married, but their relationship was a unique one. Because the Lakers were based in Los Angeles, Fox spent most of his time either on the West coast or traveling while Williams stayed in New York to work on her career and raise her family, which now included Fox’s son Kyle from a previous relationship. Still, things worked out and on May 1, 2000, the couple welcomed their daughter Sasha Gabriella into their family.

Despite the ups and downs of her life, Williams remains the ultimate survivor. “As much tragedy and scandal as I’ve had in my life, I’ve also been very fortunate. I feel truly blessed. I love my kids, I love my husband and I love my work. That supersedes all my struggles,” she remarked in *Essence*.

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Matthew M. Totsky



Venus Williams

Venus Williams (1980–)

Athlete, professional tennis player

Venus Williams, along with her sister Serena, ushered in a new era in professional tennis, as she and Serena cut a swath through the women’s ranks, winning numerous tournaments, breaking records, and earning respect for their dogged competitiveness and enormous talent. A firm family foundation and years of training led Venus to achieve the number one ranking in women’s tennis, a height reached by no other African-American woman before her.

Venus Williams was born on June 17, 1980, in Lynwood, California. Her father, Richard, waited four years before giving Venus her first tennis racket. Unlike her older sisters, Richard claimed that Venus had an instant passion for the game from the moment she picked up a racket. The same held true for Venus’s sister, Serena, who was born fifteen months after Venus. While Richard held practices for the older neighborhood kids on the graffiti-splashed public courts, Venus and Serena would come along. The first time she was on the court, Venus demanded from her father that she hit every one of the 550 raggedy balls from the grocery cart, crying if Richard tried to stop her. Soon, she was hitting one thousand balls and asking for another thousand.

The tennis courts where Richard would hold his practices for his two little girls were cracked, littered with glass, overgrown with grass, and sometimes dangerous. The courts were located in East Rancho Dominguez, a poor ghetto area frequented by drug dealers, vagrants, and rival gangs. On one occasion, a gunman fired shots near them during a practice.

Although Venus's extraordinary athletic skills were evident in several sports by the time she was in elementary school, her mother, Oracene, wanted Venus spared the physical stress of multiple sports. Venus chose to play tennis. By the time she was ten years old, the long-legged, gangly girl was the number one-ranked player in the Southern California 12-and-under division, with a 63–0 record. Soon a national tennis magazine ran a story on the girl from the ghetto. Shoe, equipment, and sports apparel manufacturers followed closely behind, sending the 5'4" prodigy their products for free. Agents and the media came calling, too, including a visit from promoter Don King, who took the whole family out to dinner in a limousine.

In an unprecedented move, Richard refused to permit allow Venus to play in the juniors from the time she was eleven years old until she was fourteen. No player had ever gained prominence in the modern game of tennis without first competing on the juniors circuit.

When Venus was eleven, an offer came from Richard Macci, who ran a tennis training center for young players in Florida. Richard had invited Macci to Compton to watch Venus play, and Macci was so impressed he offered Venus and Serena full scholarships and the rest of the family free housing. So in September 1991, Venus and her family moved to Orlando, and Venus began to practice six hours a day, six days a week. After attending public school for a year, the grueling tennis schedule made attending normal school hours difficult, so the Williamses began to home-school their daughters.

The Pros Cannot Wait

As planned, Richard kept Venus off the juniors circuit for three years, repeatedly making public comments that under no circumstances would he allow Venus to play professional tennis at fourteen. At the same time, the Women's Tennis Council (WTC) revised its rules on the issue. The old age limit of fourteen was abandoned, and a new minimum age of fifteen was instituted, with tournament eligibility increasing each year until the player achieved full status at eighteen. However, the WTC also instituted a controversial grandfather clause that allowed current players who turned fourteen by the end of 1994 to play in professional tour events, under which Venus qualified. Several critics believed Richard, contrary to his public comments, had persuaded the WTC to make this exception so that Venus could begin play that year at age fourteen.

On October 31, 1994, Venus Williams finally began her professional career at the Bank of the West Classic in Oakland, California. In her first professional tournament, the 6'1", 155-pound, fourteen-year-old girl wonder exploded onto the professional tennis scene with a 6–3, 6–4 victory over 59th-

ranked player Shaun Stafford, proving detractors wrong. As would be his trademark, Richard displayed his eccentric attitude when he told the press that he wished his daughter had lost so that she would have to go through a period of struggle. He had at other times expressed similarly contradictory attitudes in encouraging Venus's competitive spirit, only to later claim that he had tried to persuade Venus to quit tennis. Continuing these irreconcilable postures, before her next match against Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, Richard shook Sanchez-Vicario's hand and told her he hoped she won. Sanchez-Vicario did win in three sets, but in the process, Venus won fans and respect. But the world would need to wait several years before getting a full look at Venus. Over the next few years, Richard limited Venus's tournaments in order to let her mature slowly.

Over the next few years, Venus Williams played in few tournaments. She began 1995 as the 205th-rated player in the world. In that year, she played in only three tournaments, including an upset over the 18th-ranked Amy Frazier in the second round of the 1995 Bank of the West Classic. She played in only five Women's Tennis Association (WTA) tournaments in 1996 and did not make it to the final round in any of them.

Makes Impressive Breakthrough

In March 1997, at the lowly rank of 211, Venus started heating up. She upset the fifth-ranked Iva Majoli in the third round of the Evert Cup in California, before losing to the eighth-ranked Lindsay Davenport. Davenport commented after the game that Venus was en route to being one of the great stars of the game. After the tournament, Venus admitted that she missed school, missed midterms, missed her dogs, and missed home. But continuing to improve, she played in her first Grand Slam (Wimbledon, Australian Open, French Open, and U.S. Open) event in May of that year, beating the 41st-ranked player in the world, Naoko Sawamatsu, at the French Open, before losing to Nathalie Tauziat of France.

By Wimbledon in July, she was ranked 59th. Wearing purple and green beads in her hair, the official colors of Wimbledon, she lost in three sets to Magdalena Grzybowska. But it was playing in the new Arthur Ashe Stadium at the U.S. Open in September where many believe Venus turned the corner on her professional career. Ranked 66th, she made it to the finals, where she faced her teen rival Martina Hingis, the number one player in the world. Although Hingis won the showdown, Venus Williams was proud to be the first African-American woman to play in the U.S. Open finals since Althea Gibson in 1958, and her rank rocketed to 27th in the world by the end of the year. The WTA would name her Newcomer of the Year.

Venus Williams participated in only a handful of tournaments until she was seventeen, and played in no Grand Slam tournaments during these years. She continued going to school during this time, and her father said that how many tournaments she played in would depend upon the grades she maintained. Expectedly, she maintained an A average and even expressed to the press that she was too young to stay in

hotels weeks on end. She often told reporters she wanted to attend college.

In January of 1998, Venus Williams came crashing back into tennis at the Australian Open, where she got revenge against Martina Hingis in the first round. In the second round, Venus faced her younger sister, Serena, for the first time as a professional. Serena had just turned pro the previous year, and it was the first time the sisters had competed in eight years. After an even start, Venus eventually pulled away for a 7–6, 6–1 straight-set victory. But Venus’s Australian Open run would come to a halt when the number two player in the world, Lindsay Davenport, defeated her.

Venus avenged her Australian Open loss in the next few months with her first two singles titles at the IGA Tennis Classic in Oklahoma City and the Lipton Championships in Key Biscayne, where she earned \$235,000 for her victory. The two victories propelled her to 12th in the world. 1998 also saw Venus clock a 127-mph serve, a women’s world record, in the quarterfinals of the Swisscom Challenge.

In February of 1999, Venus won the IGA Tennis Classic in Oklahoma City. What made this win so special is that on that same day, only a few hours earlier, Serena had won Gaz de France. It was the first time that two sisters had ever won singles titles on the WTA tour on the same day. Venus said she felt it had been her duty to win the IGA after Serena had e-mailed her to tell her about her victory in France. In March of 1999, the two Williams sisters would meet again at the Lipton Championships finals. Both made statements to the press that they wanted to win, but kept perspective by stating that the match was just one match and there would be more. After three long sets, Venus finally won. This close relationship would help them in June, when they won their first Grand Slam women’s doubles title at the French Open.

As 2000 arrived, Venus Williams suffered from tendonitis in both her wrists. There was talk from her father that she was thinking about retiring and getting into the fashion design business, for which she had been taking college courses. But at Wimbledon, the two sisters met again in the semifinals. As had happened their last match, Venus won. Venus went on to beat Lindsay Davenport in the finals in straight sets. Afterwards, she climbed the bleachers to her family’s box seats, where she and Serena pressed their heads together in celebration. The victory at Wimbledon finally gave Venus Williams her first Grand Slam singles title and made her the first African-American to win Wimbledon since Arthur Ashe in 1975, and the first African-American woman since Althea Gibson in 1958. At the Sydney Olympics, she was the first woman to win a gold in singles and doubles (with Serena) since 1924. Soon thereafter, she won her second Grand Slam title at the U.S. Open.

Venus’s hot streak continued into 2001 when she and Serena won doubles at the Australian Open, and Venus won the Ericsson Open, the Hamburg title, and her second Wimbledon title, making her number one in earnings for 2001 with over \$2,600,000. She re-signed with Reebok, earning a five-year, \$40 million endorsement deal. She also signed deals with Nortel Networks, Wilsons Leather, and Avon. She

said she planned to donate some of the proceeds from her endorsements to children’s charities and breast-cancer research. Finally, Venus Williams achieved the number one ranking in the world in February 2002. She was the first African-American woman to hold that spot on the WTA rankings since the ranking started in 1975.

Venus’s reign at the top was short-lived, however, as Serena Williams took over that position after dominating her sister at the 2002 Wimbledon tournament, defeating Venus 7–6, 6–3. The sisters also won the Wimbledon women’s doubles competition. Venus fell to the number two ranking after the defeat by Serena. Serena had previously defeated Venus in the 2002 French Open as well.

Being Black in an All-White Sport

Tennis had, in general, been a sport for the wealthy and white, because it is a sport where instruction and lessons are necessary, which are expensive. There were few professional African-American tennis players, Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson being by far the most prominent, and many had a difficult time accepting a little girl from poor South Central. This elitism was often articulated outright to the Williamses when Venus was a young prodigy playing at all-white country clubs. They would overhear racist and snobbish whispers, saying Venus did not belong.

Once his two youngest girls achieved fame as tennis stars, Richard often pointed out to reporters that not all families in Compton were criminals, struggling, and welfare recipients. He wanted the world to know that there were respectable, hardworking families that lived there. Keeping true to this theme, when Venus would win big matches, Richard often said, “Today was a good day for the ghetto.”

Acknowledging her role as a role model and trailblazer, Williams has taken pride in her responsibility to youth. Although busy with practice and interviews on the road, Venus often takes time to speak to inner-city youth and run tennis clinics, reminding them that despite financial and social obstacles, success is attainable. Back in her home state of California, she and Serena began a program for urban kids called the Venus and Serena Williams Tutorial/Tennis Academy. The program centers on educational success and awards achieving students with free tennis lessons. Interestingly, before her very first professional tournament in Oakland, California, Venus was not pounding practice shots as one would expect; rather, she was doing something she found a priority: speaking to black youths in Oakland about the importance of education and studying.

Inside Venus

Outside of tennis, Venus Williams has worked to keep her life in perspective. Venus’s mother was a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and, although Richard did not join the group, the children were members. Even while training hours a day in Florida, Venus would still attend worship services three days a week and travel door-to-door preaching her beliefs. Even after Venus achieved world recognition, she

continued the Jehovah's Witnesses' tradition of door-to-door preaching in their upscale neighborhood. Venus and Serena also follow the faith's strict celebration rules restricting birthday and Christmas celebrations. She told *USA Today* that her God, Jehovah, is the most important thing in her life, followed by her family and education.

One of Venus's hallmarks was her colorful hairbeads. Oracene originally started the girls in wearing the beads both because it made caring for their hair easier, and it showed pride in their African-American heritage. "V," Serena's girlhood nickname for Venus, used about 1,800 beads in her hair, and with the help of her mother and Serena, could redo her hair in about an hour and a half. However, she has recently gone without beads, opting sometimes for flowing reddish locks. She says that she just got tired of the beads.

As for the future, she knows that she cannot play tennis forever. She has shown a serious interest in fashion design and attended classes at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale. She contributes to the Reebok designs she wears on the court, and there are plans to come out with a Venus Collection clothing line. Regardless of what Venus Williams does after tennis, it is clear that her parents prepared her emotionally, spiritually, and educationally to confront the world outside the confines of the tennis court.

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Thomas W. Scholl



Cassandra Wilson

Cassandra Wilson

(1955–)

Singer

Considered by many as the best in her generation of jazz vocalists, Cassandra Wilson rose to prominence in the late twentieth century. Defying easy categorization, Wilson has recorded genre-spanning and experimental albums. They have included such diverse selections as her own compositions, jazz standards, Robert Johnson's blues tunes, folk songs by Bob Dylan, and a song by rock band U2. Her voice, a deep, luscious contralto, has infused familiar songs with a new sense of mystery. Wilson has drawn comparisons with jazz greats such as Betty Carter, Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simone. From the 1990s on, she has attracted a large crossover audience that was virtually unheard of for other jazz performers. Yet despite overwhelming acclaim for her singing, jazz purists have questioned Wilson's commitment to jazz and critics have regularly commented that her albums were uneven and not cohesive.

From the time she was a young girl, Wilson was exposed to a wide variety of jazz music. Her father, Herman B. Fowlkes, had worked as a jazz guitarist and bassist before