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Goliath Meets Camille

CATALYST CAMILLE

by Sharon Fitzgerald

The temptation to address Camille Cosby by her first name is irresistible, tempered only by her perfect social grace. To observe the amenities is apropos but a bit surprising, considering that to many she has seemed a longtime acquaintance, even a family friend. Whenever her husband, Bill, has segued into a new and bemused description of home life with the words "My wife, Camille," we have smiled, sensed the endearment, shared his gratitude that God created mothers—those warm, no-funny-business eyes of the storm.

Since earning her doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts two years ago, Cosby has been on a tear, the impact of which is on the horizon. In September her dissertation, *Television's Imageable Influences—The Self-Perceptions of Young African-Americans* (University Press of America), was published in book form. In October, her production company, COC Productions Inc., released its first documentary, *No Dreams Deferred*, a portrait of the relationships between a married couple in Atlanta and the five young men mentored within their restaurant and catering business.

She secured the rights to *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First*

100 Years, the best-selling memoirs of centenarians Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany, and is co-producing a stage version of the sisters' story, which will begin a pre-Broadway run in February at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, N.J. Simmering on the back burner is a feature film script on South African leader Winnie Mandela, whose life story Cosby optioned back in 1986.

At age 50, Camille Cosby is publicly, uninhibitedly, cutting to the chase. "When I do these things, I want the message to go out that I am self-defining," she says. "I am not allowing others to define me—neither me as Camille nor me as an African American. What I present to the public will be our definitions, African-American definitions and representations, that have not been focused on very much.

"I don't want others outside of our community to define us, because they are doing a horrible job of it. And they are lying."

Full marital partner and business manager, mother of five, student, patron of the arts, philanthropist: In an era where no excuses are needed either for getting yours or having it all, Camille Olivia Hanks Cosby has quietly upped the ante, her example reminding wannabes that making millions is never as impressive as knowing what to do when you get them.

Remarkably, two of our culture's most independent luminaries met on a blind date. At age 19, while a psychology student at the University of Maryland, Camille Hanks, a native of Washington, D.C., was asked to join friends for a movie. Her escort? A 26-year-old comedian from Philadelphia. She recognized his sincerity and humor, but for William Cosby, it was love at first sight. On their second outing, he proposed.

Naturally, it took some persuading before Mr. and Mrs. Hanks consented to their daughter's leaving college, marrying and heading off into the entertainment sunset. But providence smiled on the newlyweds. Within 10 months of the nuptials, Bill Cosby had landed a stand-up spot on the *Tonight* show, captured the attention of TV producer Sheldon Leonard, and been offered a starring role on the TV series *I Spy*.

Bill Cosby's wry, sophisticated portrayal of secret agent Alexander Scott would boost ratings and win Emmys. A year after the Cosbys' cup began running over, Bill's relationship with his "first and only manager" soured. From that point on, not only would Camille observe the process of image making firsthand; she would also partner one of the most successful careers in the history of television.

"When Bill released his manager,

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I realized that I had to become a participant," she recalls. "In this kind of business, you have to protect each other. I think it is difficult for a performer to totally immerse himself or herself in creativity and watch everything else, too. You need someone who really cares about you, someone who is dependable and honest, and that is difficult to find.

"My husband and I function as partners, not only in marriage, but in terms of business. It should be that way. There are a lot of discussions, and there is a lot of respect for each other as well. We are a team."

The team roster increased steadily, with the birth of four girls and one boy, who now span the ages 18 to 29. After six years in Los Angeles and the end of that first TV series, the Cosbys returned East and took up primary residence in Amherst, Mass. It was while overseeing her children's education in this small university town that Mrs. Cosby decided to return to school.

"I wanted to complete my education for my own satisfaction," she says. "I believed that if I was going to talk to people, give speeches or do anything publicly, I would have to have my credentials to back me up. Education empowers you; it places you in a position to verbally challenge people who are giving you a whole lot of nonsense. Once I got in, I just kept going."

In the education department at the University of Massachusetts, Cosby studied organizational development, the process of examining existing structures to determine how to effect change. When the time came to select an area of influence, she chose the arena that she knew best, the one that would test her mettle: the TV industry. Goliath, meet Camille.

"It is horrendous what they are doing to us on television," she says. "They are increasing the numbers of negative images about African

Americans. Every time we see anything relative to a lower-income black community, they show criminals, drugs and lowlife sex—those kinds of things. Programs like *Roc* and *Frank's Place* don't last long. In terms of their attacks, I haven't seen anything quite like this in a long time. And I think that they are doing this at the same time that we are becoming more victorious as a people.

"There are zillions of wonderful stories to tell, but they—meaning television's controlling, hegemonic strata—won't deal with those stories. They only want to perpetuate what they have always perpetuated: that we are buffoons and mummies and lazy. If you turn on the television today, you will see that; and if you look at old movies that were made in the 1920s, '30s and '40s, you will see the same images."

Catty-cornered in the living room of the Cosbys' New York City town house is a big-screen TV set—a forceful, high-tech presence. However, in this setting, its influence is eclipsed by a portion of what University of Maryland art professor David Driskell, the Cosbys' friend and personal curator, describes as the "premiere collection of African-American art in private hands": paintings by Romare Bearden, Horace Pippin, Norman Lewis and Charles Alston, as well as one by jazz musician and family friend Clark Terry. In a room—and in a life—possessed of its own culture, television's messages do not stand a chance.

Camille Cosby contends that only when we appreciate and demand respect for our own identities—and create and support images that do justice to our character and diversity as a people—will we wrestle the power to stereotype away from the powers that be.

In *Television's Imageable Influences*, she analyzes both the "specific aspects of self" affected by television's images of blacks and the

impact that these depictions have on the self-perceptions of young African Americans. "I consulted a psychologist, Dr. Jessica Henderson Daniel at the Harvard Medical School, who says that the limited life experience of young people is partially responsible [for their inability to analyze how they are influenced by what they see]. It is difficult for them to distinguish between ridicule and humor. That hit me; it succinctly explained it all."

What makes today's caricatures and stereotypes of blacks more insidious is that they appear to be created and sanctioned by blacks themselves. "I absolutely despise *Def Jam*," she responds when asked about the comedy broadcast. "I can go on record saying this. When people start out doing the comedy that you see on *Def Jam*, usually they are young. But what happens is that you grow up, get into your 30s and 40s and want to change your material, to do something that is more reflective of your age and maturity, and people are not going to think you are funny anymore.

"I am not a comedian, I am just saying what I have learned from watching comedians. Take Richard Pryor: Young people who use that lewd language do not understand Richard's humor. He had a message. He was a storyteller. He was absolutely brilliant. He just didn't say words to get a laugh; he was painting a picture. But these young people don't have any material. That is why they can't do what Richard does, and that is why they don't want to do it, because it takes work."

It is always important, she insists, to look beyond the spotlight. "It is my guess that if you don't do that kind of material, you are not going to be allowed to appear on *Def Jam*. And if you stand in front of an audience with the television cameras on you, and everyone is laughing, that is pretty heady stuff. That reinforces your willingness to degrade yourself and your people."

But let us not forget mainstream attempts to satirize race relations in this country. Remember Archie Bunker? Camille Cosby does. "When it comes to us," she says, "then something serious like bigotry is always made to be funny. But when it comes to other groups, they don't make that funny; you begin to see very serious films. For example, you don't see anything comedic about Hitler."

Entertainment is a high-stakes game. While participants await the royal flush of fame and fortune, those of us on the sidelines risk mortgaging our social, political and cultural identities, not to mention our understanding of others. Cosby's exposure to the industry, as well as her extensive travels abroad, have alerted her to the far-reaching dangers of toying with this medium.

"I don't think that we are aware of our power," she says. "If African Americans and other people who are being misrepresented would use their dollars to say to television sponsors that we are not going to support you unless you support good programming that represents us fairly, then they would change very quickly. I believe in the old-fashioned boycott. There is propaganda out there that says it is impractical, but that is not true.

"We are going to have to be more self-sufficient, almost the way black communities were when they were segregated. We need to buy the theaters in our communities; we need to buy television stations. We need to have more money in our own banks if we want to purchase and be competitive on that level."

Ownership of the TV networks is an issue that the Cosbys have tackled head-on. When it was rumored that the NBC peacock was bound to fly into the nest of another media conglomerate, Bill Cosby approached the executives of General Electric, the network's owners, and offered to purchase the faltering company. It seemed a likely

and exciting match; after all, it was the epic ratings of *The Cosby Show* that had provided NBC with its last period of glory.

Granted, the \$4 billion asking price was a bit steep, but as Cosby and company combed Wall Street looking for other investors, the on-again-off-again sale turned off again. The network suddenly was not on the market.

"My husband is not pursuing it now," Cosby says. "There were a lot of obstacles. You see, it has always been easy for people to accept black performers when they perform. There has always been the stereotype that to perform is a natural thing, innate, a gift that we have. We don't have to study; we don't have to have intelligence. We just get up there and perform.

"But when you are a performer *and* a businessperson, when you know what to do with the money that you are generating, when you become a player, such as going after NBC and trying to acquire it, then all kinds of doors are going to shut. You are not supposed to have that. That is rather threatening, you know?"

Cosby is cautious, however, when asked if such endeavors have thrust the Cosby empire into a position of leadership: "To be a leader can be a rather tenuous position." She believes a crucial step toward progress will be taken when we distinguish between celebrity and leadership. "The media portrays our celebrities as role models," she explains, "but we have to really look around us and determine who our role models are. I have never read an article about a white celebrity that portrayed him or her as a role model for white people. But when you read about black role models, they are either entertainers or athletes.

"We need the doers. I think that the unrewarded doers are the community workers. They never get recognition, and they contribute a lot."

Remember Archie Bunker? Camille Cosby does. "When it comes to us," she says, "then something serious like bigotry is always made to be funny. But when it comes to other groups, they don't make that funny; you begin to see very serious films. For example, you don't see anything comedic about Hitler."

It would be difficult to find unsung heroes more harmonious than Thelma and Wesley Williams, whom Cosby met when the couple catered a party for the Cosbys. When she learned that the Williamses used their kitchen facility as a practicum where young people could learn the catering and restaurant business, it struck her that this enterprise could be the ideal subject of a documentary representing her first solo flight as executive producer.

No Dreams Deferred steps quietly into the lives of the Williamses and five young men and reveals the ingredients of their achievements. For 68 minutes, we are in their midst: striving, correcting, being corrected, kidding around, coming clean, shining, preparing for a future that is (thanks to willpower and vision) within our grasps.

David, a former gang member, is one young man rescued by the Williamses. What he discovers in the haven of Our Family Table, under

the tutelage of the bakery's pastry chef, Alvin Clark Sr., is a talent for baking bread. We watch as he mixes the ingredients, kneads the dough, prepares the loaves. His voice-over explanation of the process, the importance of tending to every detail, is poetic. By the time he entrusts his work to the oven, the audience shares his nervous anticipation. When the golden loaves emerge and the young maestro holds each to his ear and taps gently, the theater is filled with laughter, sighs and applause.

David (who has decided to become a pastry chef and is now an employee of Our Family Table) was present at the film's debut last September at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The young

man was clear about the message he would like the story to relay: "It's never too late to change your mind," he says. "If you had told me that I would be baking bread two years ago, I would have laughed in your face. But it's never too late to switch and head into a positive direction."

At once we realize that not only does Camille Cosby mean to identify what is missing in our self-expression; she also is determined to replace that hunger with the best fruits that our people have planted. "I wanted to put something on film that would project positive imageries of young African-American males," she says. "The idea was also to show what one can do in an environment that is affirming, an envi-

ronment that has discipline with love."

As soon as she read *Having Our Say*, Cosby knew that she wanted to option the rights for the book's dramatization. ("I thought about my grandparents," she says. "I thought about all of the old people I loved when I was a kid.") After the expected acquisition skirmishes that accompany bestsellers, she won the bidding. She is now co-producing the project with Judith Rutherford James, her partner in C&J Productions. The play's only two performers, Mary Alice and Gloria Foster, will transport audiences through the decades.

The memoirs of Sarah and Elizabeth Delany will allow Cosby to share the stories of two extraordi-

POWER OF A PEOPLE

"I don't know whether I perceive us as being powerful," Camille Cosby says of her husband and herself. "I do think that whatever decisions we make, relative to our work, are going to be influential. Maybe that's power in itself, but I think that is the responsibility you have when you are a public figure."

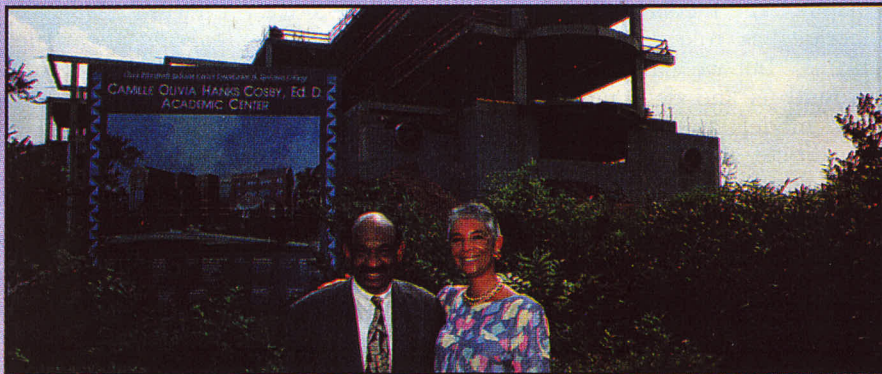
Undoubtedly, the Cosbys' esti-

mated \$300 million fortune puts a lot of distance between them and many dilemmas facing other Americans, black or otherwise. And sure, the chances of running into one of them at Kmart are pretty slim. Still, their pride in black culture and their belief in the potential of African-American people has been demonstrated time and again.

At last count, their philanthropic contributions—particularly to black students, colleges and universities—ran well over \$70 million. "We feel that if we can help to educate one generation, they will continue educating the others," Cosby says. "It will just snowball. That's what we want to do. We think this is the best way that we can impact society positively."

In mid-1995, the Camille Olivia Hanks Cosby Academic Center will be dedicated at Spelman College in Atlanta, the 114-year-old institution's way of saying thank-you for the Cosbys' unprecedented \$20 million contribution. "It's not for me," she says. "I want the students to know that the building is for them. It is for their descendants. It is for their ancestors. It should be symbolic of black achievement, particularly for women who are part of the African diaspora. It is really for all of us."

The money helps, but what such



Camille Cosby with Herman Russell, the chairman of one of the construction companies building the Academic Center.

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nary African-American women while at the same time examining the history of the United States. The Delany sisters were 101 and 103 years old when their story was published two years ago.

"Because they have lived so long," Cosby says, "they really articulate the history of America. They talk about some of their ancestors who were in slavery; they lived through the establishment of the Jim Crow laws and *Plessy v. Ferguson*. They knew people like Dr. Anna J. Cooper and W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington and other wonderful people in our history. These events are their life experiences."

Ironically, it has been the story of Winnie Mandela, a person known

throughout the world, that has been the most difficult for Cosby to bring to the screen. She purchased the rights to Mandela's life story in 1986, and a feature film script was prepared several years ago. Cosby is determined to see the project completed, even as she is philosophical about its delays. "I have had more people say that they will not help finance this project," she says. "They keep asking, 'Who is going to watch this film?'"

"I am sure that there are a lot of reasons for the problems, but the main one is that this is an image of a black woman that they don't want on film. Mrs. Mandela is quite radical. She says what she wants to say and how she wants to say it. She is daring, she is glamorous and she is

bright. She is really multi-dimensional. We don't even have an American black woman with this kind of image on film or in a play or anywhere else."

Camille Cosby sees herself not as a leader, but rather as an instrument of change. The richness of her life begins with its experiences and its people—her husband, children, parents, other family members and friends. She has been inspired by all of them. And her sense of purpose appears most deeply rooted in the wisdom of lessons she has learned—and now strives to share with others.

For example, the words of her friend John Henrik Clarke often propel her: "African people can have a Golden Age or another Age of Continued Despair, depending on how they view themselves in relationship to the totality of history and its ironies," wrote Clarke. "The cruelest thing slavery and colonialism did to the Africans was to destroy their memory of what they were before foreign contact." Cosby hears in those statements the promise that to know oneself is power.

She is also fond of the phrase "Seeing is believing." In her mind, its meaning cuts two ways: A negative view of ourselves and others can distort our understanding, but an assertion of the good things—the strength and love that we are seldom shown—can draw each of us closer to empowerment and truth.

"I just want to be a change agent," she says. "I want to do my part in helping people to change their negative attitudes about us as a people. And hopefully, if we have any negative attitudes about ourselves, I want to help change those, too."

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Cosby with Spelman College President Johnnetta Cole.

educating the first generations of college students. They were having problems getting funds from the alumni.

"After the civil rights movement, when white institutions were recruiting black students, I think that some African Americans began believing that the white colleges were better," she continues. "We were forgetting about the history of black institutions and the fact that they had educated so many of our prominent leaders. So my husband and I were inspired to contribute and to make those contributions public so that the importance of these schools would be known."

Her husband's and her contributions are larger, Cosby maintains, because it is within their means to do so. But the responsibility to give what one can belongs to every member of the group. Team effort is key.—S.F.

headline-grabbing gifts have further accomplished (along with the TV series *A Different World* and Cliff Huxtable's assorted sweatshirts from black colleges) is to bring African-American colleges and universities into the forefront of public awareness. And to think, none of this might have happened if Camille Cosby hadn't written her master's thesis on black educational institutions.

"I traveled to eight of our colleges and universities and talked with the president of each one," she recalls. "I learned that the graduates of the schools were not sending their children; the schools were