

Dare to Imagine: Storyteller challenges listeners to dream

As a kid I devoured books. I especially loved biographies. I hated history, but loved the stories of real people. Especially stories of women. And Black people. If the stories were of Black women, I was in heaven — curled up on the couch, or lying across my bed, far from the world around me, deep in the lives lived before me. I can still remember the tattered paperbacks I read over and over again: Harriett Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad, and Mary McLeod Bethune, Founder of Bethune Cookman College. In those stories I could see myself and imagine what I could be. I believed what my parents said: that I could be anything I wanted to be. My dad used to say, “You could be the next Wilma Rudolf. Or maybe you’ll be President of the United States of America.”

When I was finishing high school, I wanted to be Marva Collins, or at least a powerful educator like her. I remember speaking about her inspiration to me at my college interview.

When I got to Brown in 1983, I thought I would be an English teacher who directed the high school play. That seemed the logical place to combine my loves of stories and drama, teaching and learning. But when I got to Providence, I was fortunate enough to meet Ramona Bass Kolobe and her late husband George Bass of Rites and Reason Theatre. There I was fortunate to be surrounded by Black people committed to Black storytelling. I had found my place, my people.

I designed my own major in storytelling and began the practice of telling stories that had inspired me as a little Black girl growing up in predominantly white spaces (with a white mother, to boot, who was responsible for my having those paperbacks, by the way). I looked for stories I wish I had when I was in school. I remember finding a book called GREAT SLAVE NARRATIVES edited by Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes in the discount bin at the Brown Bookstore for \$2. In it I read about William and Ellen Craft for the first time. I knew I had to tell the story of this Black couple that had fled from enslavement arriving in freedom on Christmas Day in 1848. I knew I had to tell it in Ellen’s voice. So many of the stories of Black women in our history were recorded by men, mostly white men. I wanted to tell it as I imagine Ellen might have told it. I still do.

I am full of emotion today. It is Inauguration Day. I just witnessed Kamala Harris, a Black and Asian woman, become the Vice President of the United States. She and Michelle Obama made eye contact today that spoke volumes. The poet today was a 22-year-old Black woman, and the Pledge of Allegiance was led by a young Black female firefighter who signed as she spoke. Today is also my Dad’s birthday. He would have been 89. The last Inauguration he and my mom witnessed was Obama’s. I can’t help but think of how he opened possibility for me. And my mom, who made sure I knew my history, to help me dream a future.

I didn’t become President, nor do I want to. But I have lived to see both a Black President and a Black woman Vice President. This is what Harriet, Mary, Wilma, Ellen, Marva, Mom, Dad and, and, and, fought to make possible. I became a storyteller so I can share these stories and more to inspire others to be whatever they dare to imagine. This is why Black stories matter.