

Why this 'Bel-Air' star takes pride in growing up in foster care

Jimmy Akingbola is sharing his story of growing up in foster care in London for the first time.



Jimmy Akingbola. Maarten de Boer / NBCUniversal via Getty Images

April 23, 2023, 11:57 AM EDT / Source: TODAY

By Randi Richardson

Jimmy Akingbola says he can now sympathize with why his mother gave him to child services when he was 2 years old.

"My mom left me," he recalls to TODAY.com. "But actually, if you break it down, it comes from a place of protection."

Akingbola says his mom, Eunice, lived with schizophrenia and was no longer able to take care of him, but she didn't want him to go without certain necessities in life.

"She was on medication (and) she was trying to get better," he says. "I was supposed to go back to my mom, but the illness just kept fluctuating and got worse. So the decision was to allow me to be fostered."

His personal experience in the foster care system helped to inspire some of his "Bel-Air" character Geoffrey's storyline — specifically the part about Geoffrey's son who was adopted by another family and later comes back into his life — an aspect that Akingbola wanted included.

Now, the "Bel-Air" star is sharing his journey through the foster care system in London for the first time in his documentary, "Handle With Care," which is currently streaming on Peacock.

In an interview with TODAY.com, Akingbola opens up about his parents' arguments that led to him being fostered, how he learned to forgive them and why he's now proud to have went through the foster care system.

'An excuse to break away'



Jimmy Akingbola's biological parents and two of his older siblings. **Peacock**

How Akingbola ended up in foster care is more layered than just his mother's mental health journey.

He and his three biological siblings originally lived with their parents. At the time, his father, Akeen, was unaware of his mother's mental health diagnosis and how she would travel to help cope, Akingbola says. Her travel prompted his dad to question his paternity.

"There was times that my mom spent away ... from him — (and) went to Nigeria," he says. "Around that time was the time that I arrived. For him, I think he wanted to get

out. I feel like he used my birth and the question mark on it as an excuse to break away."

His father disowned him, divorced his mother and kicked them both out while keeping the other three children. His mother later dropped Akingbola off at child services. He was then placed with the Crowe family, whom he lived with until he was 16.

"I can never blame my mom," he says. "Even being abandoned at the social services office, I remember when I first got told that (at age 7). I was in tears, and yet, I still couldn't find the anger for it because I knew that wasn't her. That was her struggling with something financial, but also her mental state not being in a best place."

He says he's asked his mother about his father's claims and her response was: "Don't listen to him. You are his son."

Akingbola says his mother visited his foster home every two weeks. His siblings also regularly visited, and so did his dad, eventually.



Akingbola and his father reconciled when he was a teenager to the point that he finally "felt accepted" and they "really got close," he tells TODAY.com.

But on a later visit to Nigeria, his dad said, "I've been a father figure to you, but I'm not your father," Akingbola recalled in the documentary.

"OK, dad," Akingbola responded. "Let's do the test."

But after his father agreed to a DNA test, Akingbola says his father never returned his calls to confirm it.

"As a Nigerian man, if he broke up his family (because) he believed something had happened and then the blood test says that he's wrong?" Akingbola says. "He's (from) a certain generation. He can never be wrong. So rather than do it, he just refused to. That's what I believe."

Even so, Akingbola extends empathy to his father.

"There's something in me that goes, OK: You're heartbroken, you have three sisters, you're the eldest, you lost your dad young, you moved to London with a young family, you were struggling, you're a Black family in a white country and then your wife's got schizophrenia," he says. "I have to give him grace."

'A Black son or brother'



Jimmy Akingbola with his foster siblings. Peacock

Akingbola lived with one family, the Crowes, until he was 16 years old. The Crowes are a white family, and Akingbola says they are loving, accepting and feel like family.

But as a kid, he felt othered as the only Black person in the house, in the neighborhood and in the school he attended.

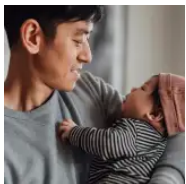
Still, Akingbola credits his positive foster care experience to the Crowes' loving and understanding of Black culture before they got him.

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“They would be called a woke family,” Akingbola says, noting that his foster mother listened to reggae music while his foster brothers listened to Luther Vandross and rappers NWA, Run DMC and the Fresh Prince, also known as Will Smith who later starred in “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air,” the series that “Bel-Air” is based on.

“It wasn’t just because they had a Black son or brother,” he says. “Those things were in their lives anyway.”

Sleepovers with friends also helped Akingbola connect with his identity, as did spending time at Community Links, a youth house with programming for kids. The

house has since been renamed in honor of Akingbola, who supports cultural awareness when parenting.

“It’s a fine line because you’re showing the kid that they’re different, but there’s a way of showing that you’re different and showing it with love and education and elevation,” he says.



Jimmy Akingbola with his foster family. Peacock

He says he grappled with how to love his foster family while still holding so much love for his biological family.

"I am here because of both families, so I can't dismiss anybody," he says. "I used to yearn to be with my biological family. I remember in my teens to early 20s, I got to the point where, if I'm yearning for that, what does this look like, this loving foster family, my family (with) unconditional love that's been there for me?"

"It's like I'm dismissing that and then when I looked at it, I've got this great hybrid of two families that know each other, that love me that got along and loved each other as well," he continues. "And that's perfect. It didn't need to be one or the other."

The two families have blended together seamlessly while also establishing some boundaries. For example, Akingbola says the Crowes never adopted him because his mother was still in his life. They hoped she'd one day get better and be able to take him back.

Akingbola's mother died during the pandemic, as did his biological and foster fathers and one of his biological brothers.

In the documentary, his two remaining biological siblings say Akingbola "had it better" because he grew up with a "loving family" in a "safe space," because their space at home "was dangerous."

"That was the first time I heard that from my my older siblings," he says. "It was hard to hear. It made me realize I had a vision of how the family was from the foster home, but they were going through something. It was a really tough time. Their environment wasn't as loving as mine or as safe as mine.... Hearing them say that I just realized, in the middle of making the doc, they had their journey as well."



Jimmy Akingbola with his foster parents. **Peacock**

'Healed'

These days, Akingbola says he's on a journey toward peace.

"Where I am now, I feel like I'm in a healed place," he says.

He likens his current goal as opening and looking "at the bottom drawer."

"We've all got some drawers in our lives, and it's a bottom drawer that I never really opened because there was a lot of sadness and pain," he says. "There's abandonment, there's mental health with my mom, there's a divorce of the family, there's identity."



Jimmy Akingbola with his biological siblings. **Peacock**

Akingbola says while he previously buried this part of his personal story, it was always present in his acting.

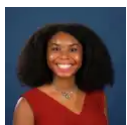
"I worked through my trauma through my roles," he says. "I think each role I had, there was something in it that I could connect to, and it was my version of opening a drawer. But an added safety net because it's a character."

That personal connection can be seen in his "Bel-Air" character Geoffrey's storyline about the adoption of his biological son by another family — a storyline that Akingbola says was already under consideration, but officially added after showrunners caught wind of his documentary.

"We had a conversation and I just gave them everything that I've been through," he says. "Then they wrote the brilliant episode that we did."

That was just a bonus, though. The real triumph, he says, was getting real with himself and not running from his trauma.

"This is real life," he says. "I've got nothing to hide. I'm proud of who I am. (The film) was also me working through my grief as well doing this is a love letter to my families."



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson is a reporter for TODAY Digital based in New York.

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MUSIC

Chaka Khan tells all, from Rock & Roll honor to protecting her mental health

The legendary singer sits down with TODAY.com for a wide-ranging interview about her life and career.

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Nov. 2, 2023, 3:08 PM EDT / Source: **TODAY**

By Randi Richardson

Chaka Khan has been telling fans something good for 50 years. Her hard work will officially be recognized on Nov. 3, when she is (finally) inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

During her storied career, Khan has released 22 albums, sold more than 70 million records and won 10 Grammys. She has notched a total of nine gold or platinum singles and albums, according to the Recording Industry Association of America.



Ahead of the induction ceremony, the 70-year-old "I'm Every Woman" singer sits down with TODAY.com to discuss the multiple projects she has in the works, her self-care routine, collaborating with Prince and more.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.



Chaka Khan performing in 1990. Michael Putland / Getty Images

How did you first get the name Chaka Khan?

It's not a stage name. It's my spiritual African name. The whole name is much longer and it's Yoruba. I was interested in the Yoruba way of life, which is a very healthy and spiritual way of life. Most of my names are named after Orisha, spirits that I would strive to become like, and each have a meaning. Chaka is warrioress. That's feminine for T'Chaka, which is the male warrior. I married a guy named Hassan Khan and the two names just work really well together. They sound a lot better than Yvette Marie Stephens.

You're getting this Rock & Roll Hall of Fame honor. You have 50 years in the business. How would you describe Chaka Khan's legacy?

Long as hell.

Never ending.

It's like every time I think, "Yeah, OK, now I can chill." It's not happening. God put me here to do this.

Have you considered retirement?

Absolutely. Yeah, but it doesn't work.

It's really amazing. It's really a major gift that God gave me and it's so much more than just music in it, you know. It's a big deal.

You've collaborated with some big names. Is there a collaboration that's your favorite?

Prince. Miles Davis. I mean, I like everybody for different reasons. But I think that the people that were closest to it became close to my heart as well.

Can you tell me about working with Prince and Miles Davis?

We did a song together called "Sticky Wicked" on one of my CDs (C.K.) and it's (with) Prince. It's his song. He wrote it for me and I performed it and then Myles also performed on the track. That was iconic for me — as iconic as you can pretty much get with three different generations of music. The experience of making it was just like it sounded: Fun! We were having fun. We really were.

How did you end up with Prince's song "I Feel for You?"

Prince wrote it up and it was on his first album, a CD, whatever. And I liked it so I covered it. We weren't good friends then yet, but we became good friends. He gave me his blessing to cover his song.



Prince and Chaka Khan performing "I Feel For You" in 2006 at the 6th Annual BET Awards. Michael Caulfield / WireImage

Your life is set to be a musical in London next year. What are you most looking forward to in that?

A good body of work I hope. I hope they do a great job. I hope everybody enjoys it. What else can you hope for? And enjoy the story behind it as well. It's probably not the best way to catalogue your life. Maybe some of the achievements, yeah, but not really your LIFE life. So it should be interesting.

How do you want your life catalogued?

I have one book called "Through The Fire" and we're working on actually part two. I didn't expect to be around so long. I've lived a whole other life since I wrote that book in 2003.

You have a new fragrance, "Chaka," out Nov. 15 on HSN. What does it smell like?

Me. My life.



Stevie Wonder and Chaka Khan in 2003. Christopher Polk / FilmMagic

Your daughter, Milini Khan, famously played you in 2016 film "Love Under New Management: The Miki Howard Story." Did she do you justice?

She did excellent. She's a great everything. She sings. I don't know where she got the thespian in her from. She's a great actress.

It scared me how much she looked like me. After she had her makeover done, she sent me a picture and I didn't know she was sending the picture. And I said, "Ouuu, looks like me."

Do you remember what type of questions she asked you to prepare for the role?

She didn't ask me anything. I'm her mother. What's there to ask?

What's something you're excited about right now?

I'm excited to stop working for a minute and take some down time for the holidays. I'm excited about what I'm doing with my fragrance. There's talk of us bringing back our chocolates again because it was such a great demand for that 20 years ago or so. People, they call them chaka-lates, but we're going to do healthy chocolates.



Chaka Khan won a Grammy for "I Feel For You" in 1985 at the 27th Annual Grammy Awards. TV Times / Getty Images

What are some of your self care practices that you would advise young people to do to take care of their mental health?

I've been doing some transcendental meditation and simply I find it to be very helpful. I'm affiliated with the [David Lynch Foundation](#), which focuses on this type of work, to promote healthy minds. Proceeds from my fragrance go to the foundation.

I've always been concerned about young people. ... I think there needs to be some initiative in place for young people trying to get out here in this madness and stay afloat.

The first thing you can do is start watching what you eat. You really are what you eat at the end of the day. That's one of the ways that genocide has crept so deeply into our culture: Bad food, sodium glutamine, sugar.

I will eat vegan food sometimes, but I'm more vegetarian. I'm a veggie person. I've been practicing this way of life since I was 16. I used to bake my own bread. I'm an herbalist. I'm an herbal doctor. They call me Dr. Khan. I carry my bag on the road so I have something that will help when someone feels under the weather.

SPORTS

Las Vegas Aces' Sydney Colson on winning the WNBA championship and giving 'women space to trash talk'

Colson spoke with TODAY.com to share behind-the-scenes insights of her role in the championship-clinching game between her Las Vegas Aces and the New York Liberty in the WNBA Finals.



Sydney Colson celebrating the Las Vegas Aces besting the New York Liberty 70-69 in Game Four of the WNBA Finals to claim the championship. Sarah Stier / Getty Images



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Oct. 25, 2023, 2:28 PM EDT / Source: **TODAY**

By Randi Richardson

What was Sydney Colson thinking in the back of her mind ahead of the Las Vegas Aces winning the WNBA championship?

Retirement.

"This (is) probably going to be my last year.' Like, that was what was in my head," Colson tells TODAY.com. "I might retire and just be done."

Stuck behind a stacked roster of standout players such as A'ja Wilson, Chelsea Gray, Alysha Clark and Kelsey Plum, the 34-year-old guard didn't see much game time until Game 4 of the WNBA Finals against the New York Liberty on Oct. 18. The Aces clinched the victory in that game, 70-69, to secure back-to-back league titles.

Colson, a veteran of eight-plus years, played 15 minutes in Game 4 and was on the court during the last play of the game, when the Aces led by a single point and the Liberty had a chance to win. It was a big deal, given that she's usually an energizer cheering on her team from the bench.

"That's crazy because I felt just like in my spirit some days leading up, (but) I had no idea what the circumstances would be for me to have to play," she explains. "But I just felt the nervousness that I typically don't feel."

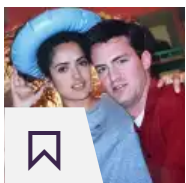


Sydney Colson won her second WNBA championship with the Aces on Oct. 18. **Frank Franklin II / AP**

Gray and Kiah Stokes, two starters, did not play in the closeout game due to injuries. Candace Parker, a previous starter, hasn't played since having season-ending foot surgery in July.

Colson says she "definitely didn't want" injuries to be the circumstance under which she saw the court, "but that kind of is the situation in pro sports and in a lot of facets in life when somebody is down or somebody is made unavailable.

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"Other people have to rally around, you gotta have that feeling to be out there on the last play, to be able to just contribute whatever in the minutes that I was in. I always go hard for my team."

Colson rising to the occasion when her number was called didn't surprise her. It actually confirmed her faith in knowing an opportunity would present itself.

"I know the work that I put in," she says. "I know what I do in practice to prepare myself. Like our team, I never lose confidence. I'm just unsure when a moment will be or if I'll get a moment. It's very much like how a lot of us probably go about our lives: If you stay prepared, stay ready so you don't have to get ready, essentially, to sum it up. And for so many of us, if you have faith, then a lot of times you're inclined to believe that, yes, God will make a way, but also (I) have to do the work."

"So stay prepared, stay working," she encouraged. "You don't know when that opportunity will come. But if you're doing all the work, when it comes, you're gonna be ready."

When asked if she still plans on retiring this year, Colson says, "If the Aces want to bring me back, absolutely I'm coming back." She re-signed with the Aces for the 2023 season in February.

With the season now over, Colson's schedule has opened up, giving her more time to continue pursuing her passion for acting, which she plans to do full-time one day. She currently stars in "The Syd + TP Show" with her best friend and former teammate Theresa Plaisance. The comedy series airs Mondays at 9 p.m. ET on Fubo platforms. Ryan Reynolds' Maximum Effort produces alongside Fubo and Togethxr, a media and commerce company founded by athletes Sue Bird (who retired last year), Alex Morgan, Chloe Kim and Simone Manuel.

Colson says she'll also be spending the offseason in the gym, training and playing with other professionals.

In the meantime, she's enjoying the aftermath of the championship. Despite her performance in the deciding Finals game, in which she contributed two points, Colson has been trolled on social media for not being a heavy-minutes player. She has a response for the negative commenters.

"People always talk and they want to talk about my averages over the years — I only score two points, all of these things — but they don't realize that I genuinely do not care," she says. "I'm willing to do whatever for my team and a lot of times it ends up being defense. And that's where I hang my hat anyways. I'm the kind of person I would much rather stop somebody from getting their average than score a lot of points."

One of the Liberty players whom Colson guarded while in the game was Sabrina Ionescu, who averaged 17 points a game during the regular season but only scored 13 in Game 4.



Sydney Colson defending Sabrina Ionescu in Game 4. Sarah Stier / Getty Images

The best-of-five series included a lot of trash talking, including when Ionescu did a gesture dubbed "night night" in Game 3, laying her head on her hands to demonstrate how the Liberty planned to send the Aces home. Plus, in the regular season, Colson says a Liberty player told her to "go back to the bench" when she was in the game. (Colson played for the Liberty during her rookie WNBA season in 2011.)

Colson famously repeated Ionescu's gesture immediately after winning the league title in an on-court postgame interview.

"I got two words to say: Night night!" she cheered at the time.

Critics online have described what Colson did as unsportsmanlike conduct.

"Looking back, I really could have not done that," she says. Colson then references how a lot of players perform better when there's a chip on their shoulders, and the Aces used the Liberty's trash talk as fuel to energize them for the game.

"For me, it was that (sleep gesture) coupled with the disrespect during the regular season," she says. "And people are mad at my response. But I'm like, it's always the response that gets the bigger reaction and there's also the added layer of when it's a white person and it's a Black person who responds because that is what we saw with Iowa and LSU. It became much bigger than I think it would have with two same-race players, whether that's white and white or Black and Black, whatever it was. Because it was white and Black, something else fueled people to be just super triggered about it."

Colson was referring to the criticism LSU's Angel Reese received for repeating a hand gesture Iowa's Caitlin Clark did to another opponent leading up to the 2023 women's college basketball championship. `

Colson says contrary to what online trolls think, there's no bad blood between her and Ionescu or their teams.

"There's no beef," she says. "We don't even know each other like that. This is just the same way that men go out and talk and do all that. People have to give women space to trash talk in professional sports. Like, it's going to be OK. We're not so fragile that you have to handle us with kid gloves."

The Liberty were also criticized after the Finals for some players, including Ionescu, skipping required postgame interviews. Colson says she empathizes with why they may have opted out, but says she doesn't have all the information regarding what went into their decision.



Sydney Colson celebrating her second title with her teammates.

Sydney Colson celebrates Las Vegas Aces' championship win / Courtesy Emily Johnson

With the 2023 WNBA season in the books, Colson hopes all the fanfare fires fans up to tune in next season.

"I love it because it should get people excited about the next WNBA season," she says. "They're going to be very excited to see these two teams match up again. For me, this is just another way to keep growing the W."



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson is a reporter for NBC News' TODAY.com based in Brooklyn.

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Audra McDonald learned of her 10th Tony nom through a voice memo from a 5-year-old

10 nominations later, McDonald tells TODAY.com she's still shocked by each one: "My life has exceeded my wildest dreams."

May 3, 2023, 1:26 PM EDT

By Randi Richardson

Audra McDonald says she was riding the train to work on May 2 when she received a voice text message.

"A friend of mine has a little boy that plays with my young daughter. He was saying, 'Auntie Audra, congratulations on your nomination,'" she recalls to TODAY.com, imitating a little kid's voice.

"That's how I found out," she says, laughing. "It was a great way to find out actually, from a little 5-year-old."

The Broadway legend tied a record when the 2023 Tony nominations were announced Tuesday. She is now in a three-way tie with Chita Rivera and Julie Harris for most performing nominations at 10.

McDonald's most recent nomination was for her lead role in "Ohio State Murders," a play written by Adrienne Kennedy that details multiple traumatic events that transpired due to structural racism.

"Ohio State Murders" was on Broadway from Dec. 8, 2022, to Jan. 15, 2023, according to the Tony awards website .

"My life has exceeded my wildest dreams."

The actor says she is still processing her record-tying nomination.

"Those things are always hard to take in," she describes. "I've been so very lucky and my life has exceeded my wildest dreams, so it's hard to process and to take in. I'm super grateful and super honored."

The Julliard graduate has won six Tony awards, more performance wins than any other person, on nine nominations for her work in "Marie Christine," "Carousel," "Master Class," "Ragtime," "A Raisin In The Sun," "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess," "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill," "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" and "110 in the Shade."

The singer says there is still shock on nomination No. 10.

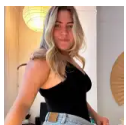
"Of course, it's always a shock because anything can happen," she says. "It's been an incredible season. All the women in my category and the women that were eligible are giving incredible performances this year, so you never know which way it's gonna go."

She was nominated alongside Jessica Hecht, Jessica Chastain and Jodie Comer.

McDonald says news of her record-tying nomination did not change her plans for the day. She found out on the way to a rehearsal and TODAY.com spoke to her when she finished up. She has no current plans to celebrate.

"I mean, I've been in rehearsals all day," she says. "I'm getting ready to get on the (train) and head home and give my 6-year-old dinner and put her to bed, get up tomorrow morning and get off to work again."

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"Ohio State Murders" earning a Tony nod is particularly significant to McDonald because it's a play written by a Black woman about a Black woman's experiences with racism. The play ran in a theater recently renamed after iconic actor James Earl Jones.

"I'm glad that that part of it was recognized," McDonald says. "To bring this Black woman's work to Broadway, to make her Broadway debut at 91 years old in a theater that has just been named for one of our great Black artists, James Earl Jones, censoring Black women or a Black woman's story, exposing how destructive racism is ... and then how, especially with this character, it was death by the thousand cuts of systemic racism.

"I have to say, it was very fulfilling," she continues. "It was one of the most difficult roles I've ever played."

She says learning of her nomination on a work day reminded her that she's doing what she loves.

"I love that it happened on a day like today where I was taking the train in to start a workshop and rehearsal for a possible (new) project," she says. "I always say the rehearsal is the best part. It was nice to just get right back in the saddle and do what I love. That was the best part of today. It was like, 'Oh, wow, that's awesome. I'm so honored and happy for Adrienne, that they remembered us, and that's wonderful.' And here I am right back in rehearsal. That part made it feel right."

"The Good Fight" actor says she "can't share too much" about the project she's working on but "it's something that thrills" her.

The mother of two's husband, Will Swenson, is also a Broadway actor and currently stars in "A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical," which opened last December, according to Playbill. Swenson was eligible to receive a Tony nod for his role, and notched one in 2009 for his role in musical "Hair," but wasn't nominated this season for his role as Neil Diamond.

McDonald says they approach their difference in nominations "with love and support."

"My husband and I have both been in this business long enough to know that sometimes you get the nod and sometimes you don't, and we have been with each other through both," she says.

"My husband's doing incredible work every night in his show," she continued. "I couldn't be more proud. Not being nominated should not invalidate the joy that they are bringing to that stage every night and the artistry that they're bringing ... and the joy and exhilaration on the audience's faces every night."

"It's about supporting each other, but at the same time realizing what's most important and that's what it's about," she says.

After meeting 17 years ago, sisters now helm the country's largest Black-owned wine brand

Thanks to one icebreaker question, Robin and Andréa McBride are now closer than ever and running a multi-million dollar company together.



— Robin (right) and Andréa McBride (left) are teaching others what they've learned about the wine industry as sister co-founders of a booming wine company. Michelle Magdalena

April 9, 2022, 6:00 AM EDT / Source: TODAY

By Randi Richardson

Andréa McBride was a 16 year old living in foster care in New Zealand when she got a phone call from her biological dad in Alabama. He told her he was dying of cancer and wanted to do one last thing before passing: connect her to another daughter he had – her sister, Robin.

In the 17 years since that fateful call, Andréa and Robin have not only met, but in 2005, they founded [The McBride Sisters Wine Company](#), the largest [Black-owned](#) wine company in the United States – and they did it without any seed money from investors.



— The McBride Sisters Collection wines are offered across the United States and New Zealand.

Michelle Magdalena

‘Sister, Sister’

Andréa said the aforementioned phone call was the first time she’d spoken to her dad in six years.

“The phone rang, and I picked it up, and the person on the other end of the phone, said, ‘Hey, Andréa, it’s your dad.’ And I definitely lost my breath,” Andréa recalled.

Her estranged dad shared his terminal diagnosis of stomach cancer and how he wanted to use his remaining energy to help her find Robin. He died seven months later, before he was able to find Robin (he’d lost touch with her after divorcing her mother).

But he did connect Andréa to his family beforehand and she traveled to his home state of Alabama to attend his funeral, during which family members vowed to fulfill his dying wish.

“It was crazy and awful and amazing sort of all at the same time. It was all the feels,” she said. “Losing our father, he was one of 12, meeting family and a lot of people that I’d never seen before but looked a lot like me. It was amazing. They were all just really focused on helping to try and find Robin.”

Andréa never doubted their intentions or efforts, but she did think their goal was unrealistic.

“I left there and had grown up in pretty tough circumstances, so didn’t really hope too much about it,” Andréa said. “It was just kind of like one thing in my mind was like, OK, yeah, yeah. But like, what are the chances we’re going to find this person out in the world?”

Andréa didn’t visit her family in Alabama again until two years later. By then, the family had been looking for Robin for five years and doubled down on their efforts after finding Andréa. The family had been sending letters to every Robin McBride in the phone book until finally one made it to their intended recipient in Monterey, California. Robin called the enclosed number, coincidentally, during Andréa’s time in Alabama. Their aunt answered and, after praising God, immediately handed the phone to Andréa so the sisters could talk for the first time.

“Andréa gets on the phone and we’re both pretty stunned and shocked because nobody thought that this was going to be happening at this moment because, according to the letter, she is in New Zealand, she’s not in Alabama,” said Robin. “So I didn’t know I was going to be talking to my sister as soon as I make the initial phone call.”

Robin remembers feeling more surprised than Andréa. “We laugh to this day because Andréa was very excited because, of course, she’s known about me for a long time. I literally just found out about her a few minutes before I called ... And she had a lot to share with me.”



— Andréa McBride told TODAY that the unconventional journey to her sister, Robin, makes the company they formed together all the more special. *Michelle Magdalena*

One of their icebreaker questions was: What was it like where you grew up? And it turned out they both grew up in small agriculture towns known for winemaking – and they were both passionate about wine. So, in an effort to bond, they went to wine tastings and vineyard tours. And eventually, they decided to start their own wine company together.

“A lot of our experiences of us being curious about wine and how we were treated when we were in those tasting rooms and stuff is really a lot of the foundation of what our company is built on today, which is making wine accessible for everybody and helping people on their journey and making it fun,” said Andréa.

‘It’s definitely an old boys’ club’

With the idea for the McBride Sisters Collection officially planted, Robin and Andréa scraped together initial seed money of \$1,800 just to cover licensing paperwork. Now, the company offers products across the United States and New Zealand and raked in over \$5.5 million in sales for fiscal year 2020, [according to Nielsen data cited by Wine Spectator](#).

The process was a grind. Robin said the industry is “very complicated” due to heavy reliance on gatekeepers – wholesalers, distributors, retailers and more – before it’s greenlit into production. Meaning, all those people have to buy the idea, granting access to the next in line, until the product finally makes it to shelves, where the profit can be made. That chain of command was the main challenge, according to Robin.

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“We had to like figure out how do we introduce new people to wine and then pull through this chain in business versus the more traditional way, which is kind of buying your way up to get access to the consumer. We just went around all of it and created demand,” explained Robin.

Another challenge was not having any investors or advisors at the onset and how the wine industry is “notorious for its gatekeeping,” said Robin. “I think we actually underestimated that.” The sisters felt discriminated against as young Black women attempting to join an industry in which they’d be a small minority.

SevenFifty Daily, an online magazine covering the business and culture of alcohol, [surveyed 3,100 industry professionals in 2019 and found](#) that of the respondents, 60 percent were men and 84 percent were white. [According to Bloomberg](#), there are more than 8,000 wineries in the country as of 2020 and 0.1 percent of them are Black-owned.

“It’s definitely an old boys’ club,” Robin said. “A large part of the industry is run by a very small group of older white wealthy men. There’s a lot of dynasties in wine. There’s a lot of family lineages that still run things. And a large part of opportunities and success has come from being associated with those people and those families. And so obviously for us coming in as opposite – really of everything that, to that point had been successful in the wine world, which was an older white man – we definitely were looked at as not just not belonging, but really incapable of being successful.”

The sisters say they made it against extraordinary odds, but it shouldn’t be that hard for Black women or minorities to join the wine industry.

Opening doors for other women of color

The sisters said their current career goal is to help usher in a more diverse generation of winemakers.

They launched the [She Can Fund](#) in 2019 and have invested more than \$3 million to date in women – particularly Black women and other women of color – in the food and wine industry. In March, they launched a new initiative that funds scholarships for women in agricultural

programs at Southern University, a historically Black college in Louisiana. Corporate sponsors of the fund include Morgan Stanley, the Wine Institute and Silicon Valley Bank. The fund also doubles as a mentorship program.

“We’ve been in the business so many years. We still don’t see a lot of women, a lot of people of color,” Andréa said. “ ... There was a lot of basic access to information that we didn’t have that we felt like shouldn’t have been one of the things that could have made or broken our company,” so they’re teaching it.

The sisters said with the doors they’ve opened, they’re committed to doing their part in leaving them open and helping others through.

“When we first started, (the wine world) was definitely a place where we felt like we didn’t belong,” said Robin. “And now we do.”

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Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.

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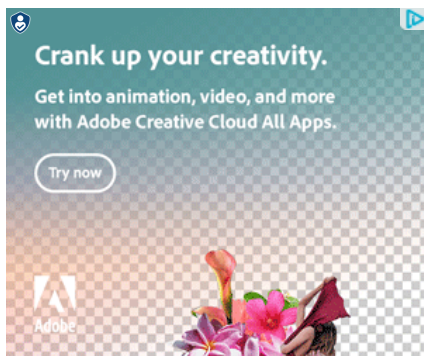
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How Black pastors under 40 are trying to get their peers back into the pews

Churches have long been a bedrock of Black American life. But with Black millennials and Gen Zers abandoning churches, young pastors attempt to invite them back in.



— Elise Wrabetz / NBC News; Getty Images

June 10, 2021, 6:00 AM EDT

By Randi Richardson

Empowerment Church in Southfield, Michigan, has a robust 1,000-member, mostly Black congregation. The Rev. Carlyle F. Stewart IV, 26, an associate pastor focused on youth and community outreach, however, says he sees the writing on the wall: His Black peers are abandoning traditional faith communities because they're not finding solace in churches or meaning in religion in the same way their parents and grandparents have.

Would-be churchgoers, Stewart said, see hostility toward the [LGBTQ community](#) and the [reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms](#), among other antiquated ideals, in direct contention with the promotion of a just God of love and fairness. He said Black millennials and Gen Zers have decided not to tolerate that as they're asking "the hard questions that were forbidden back in the day."

"The church has been pushing these theologies to where our generation was born into a situation where we look back and we realize the hypocrisy and the errors of the past," he said.

While churches have been a bedrock of Black American life for generations, especially through their roles in [racial justice movements](#) and community building, a significant portion of Gen Z and millennial Black Americans don't attend church, [according to the Pew Research Center](#). In fact, 28 percent of Black Gen Zers and 33 percent of Black millennials are religiously unaffiliated, compared to 11 percent of baby boomers, who are ages 57 to 75, the report said. As a result, younger generations are less likely to rely on prayer, less likely to have grown up in Black churches and less likely to say religion is an important part of their lives, the report said.

So what are young Black pastors doing to engage with young people and perhaps lead them back to the church?

Why young Black adults are abandoning churches, Christianity and religion altogether

Jeanne Ernest was raised in the Baptist church but was never particularly religious, and she attended church only a couple of times a year. Now, at 22, she's one in a growing group of "nones," young adults who are religiously unaffiliated.

Ernest, a paralegal in New York, said she would rather avoid the trappings of traditional churches and outdated theology for a more personal relationship with a higher power.

Her approach to faith "is questioning the concept of God in general and exploring what that means and trying to detach that from a white, patriarchal figure," she said. "'God' just sort of feels like the wrong word for whatever that force is for me at this moment."

Justin Lester, senior pastor at Congdon Street Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island, said more young adults are exploring other ways to engage with religious practices beyond the pews. He said they may be gathering at home for Bible studies, using apps such as [YouVersion](#) or streaming worship services as their schedules allow. Other options include following Christian artists like [Poets in Autumn](#) or listening to Bible-teaching podcasts, such as the [Jude 3 Project](#).

Stewart also pointed out that many young Black adults rejecting Christianity are also rejecting ties to a religion in which white Christians and churches used the Bible to **justify** slavery and racial segregation.



— Marquis Clark. Carrington Alexander

"What Black people have done in understanding our Christianity and our identity as Black Christians – we've had to develop some sort of relationship with God and some sort of sustainable church model within a greater context of Christianity in America that was oppressive," Stewart said.

Marquis Clark, 27, a pastor in Detroit, stressed that Christianity may have more inclusive roots than skeptics perceive.

"Many people say things like 'this is the white man's religion, this was forced upon us,' when, in actuality, the Bible predates the trans-Atlantic slave trade," said Clark, who is a youth pastor for Born to Win Ministries, a predominantly Black church. "Africans are heavily endowed in the first-century church. It's important for us to understand not only who we are, but our presence in the Bible and how much God loves us and what he's done for us and how much he cares for who we are as individuals."

On a more modern scale, these young Black pastors also know of young adults who have left churches citing hypocrisy stemming from scandals like [embezzlement](#), [adultery](#) and [sex abuse](#) at the hands of religious leaders. Lester said skepticism about whether pastors' personalities and personal lives line up with what they preach is another barrier.

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To address the concerns, Lester, 32, regularly visits the five colleges in Providence as part of an outreach program for Black students. During visits, Lester said, he can feel students sizing him up.

"Every encounter is an interview," Lester said. When he meets with them, he wants to reassure them that "the same person you're going to get on Sunday in the pulpit is the same person you're going to get on Monday in small groups and the same person you'll get on Thursday at choir rehearsal."

"When you know what you're going to get, that helps," he said.

Jesus and justice

Stewart and Lester said the role churches have played in the Black community can't be replaced and that continuing that legacy includes expanding access to leadership roles, reimagining church structures and taking new approaches to how the Gospel is taught. Stewart said Empowerment has been increasing its social media presence to reach younger audiences. Lester said his church's virtual services, which were introduced during the pandemic to offer convenience and flexibility, will continue after the pandemic.



— Justin Lester. Pamela Price / Congdon Street Baptist Church

Lester said he also thinks young Black adults are simply choosing to socialize in other shared places, such as coffee shops, gyms or online. The same goes for organizing efforts, which had long been central missions for some Black churches.

Even though there's a divide in attending church, about 75 percent of Black people across different faiths and age groups said Black churches have played a role in achieving racial equity, and nearly half of Black Protestant church attendees have heard a sermon on racism, the report said. But younger generations don't feel dependent on the church to practice activism, Stewart and Lester said.

"A lot of people realize that the church has been, in a lot of ways, an institution that has served its purpose in the sense of protecting Black people," Stewart said. "But now, I think our generation doesn't need that in the same way that our parents and our grandparents did, because we have different and more spaces where we can move now."

Black churches' role in social action has included serving as stops along the Underground Railroad and educating Black students before segregation was abolished in schools. During the Jim Crow era, faith leaders and church members hosted Black travelers when hotels and diners wouldn't serve them. Prominent faith leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., the Rev. William J. Barber II and Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., deliver sermons about racism and injustice while spearheading initiatives for equitable change.

Stewart, who worked with Barber's [Poor People's Campaign](#) last fall, said that equity, providing aid and community-based initiatives are biblical acts but that they are often caught in the crosshairs of political partisanship.



— The Rev. Carlyle F. Stewart IV. Courtesy Carlyle Stewart

"This is not a matter of Democrat versus Republican," he said. "This is a matter of right versus wrong in the sense of what is God calling human beings to be? Jesus was trying to encourage people and radically shift the mindset and the heart posture of people to let them know that so long as we have this system, we can never fully know God. It's about creating the kingdom of God on Earth, creating a society that is just, that includes everybody."

Beyond the church's walls, Lester and Congdon Street have championed programs to improve student attendance in three local schools, donated socks and coats to people without homes and offered free access to mental health professionals. In Congdon Street's [200-year history](#), it has been subjected to racial terrorism from 1863 to 1870, organized marches in the 1960s and launched a housing subsidy program in 1974 for elderly and physically disabled people.

Clark and Born to Win are hiring mental health professionals for church members, they have launched a project aimed at ending homelessness, and they are working with the state of Michigan on a job placement program. Clark said the church must continue its legacy of activism and develop more holistic approaches to serve the community and reach people.

"It has to be something that meets our everyday lives," he said. "And as the church, as the leaders of the church, we have to start thinking from a servant-leadership perspective. What do the people need on Monday through Saturday in collaboration with the Word of God?"

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Randi Richardson reports for TODAY Digital and NBC BLK from New York.

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'Abbott Elementary' creator Quinta Brunson on why she almost quit before her hit new show took off

The 32-year-old multi-hyphenate star sat down with TODAY to talk about why she wanted to highlight the beautiful difficulty in being a teacher at an underfunded school.



Quinta Brunson photographed for TODAY at 30 Rockefeller Center on March 16, 2022. **Nathan Congleton / TODAY**

March 16, 2022, 6:18 PM EDT / Updated March 18, 2022, 1:51 PM EDT / Source: TODAY

By **Randi Richardson**

Quinta Brunson always loved school.

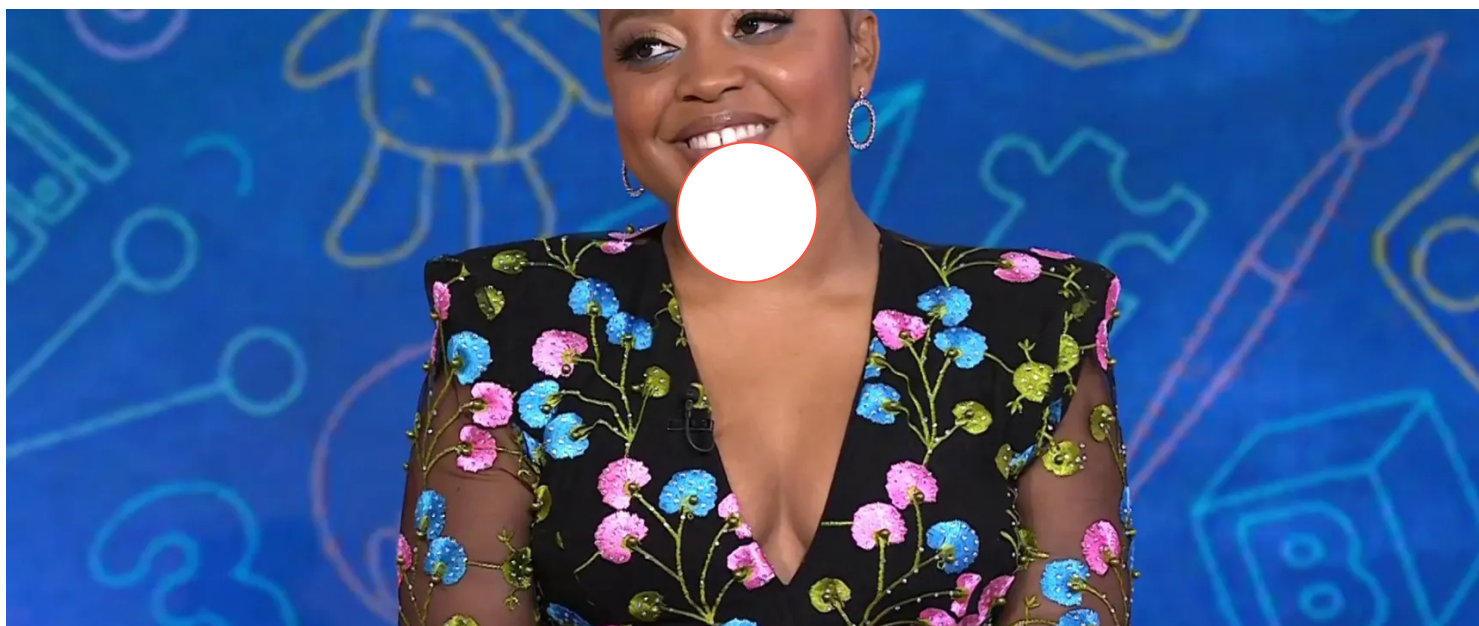
Her mom was her kindergarten teacher and they went to school each day in the same building for six years. Brunson vividly remembers specific teaching-related stories that her mother shared, inspiring her to weave some of them into the new hit ABC sitcom "Abbot Elementary," which she created and stars in.

"One of her stories I used in the pilot actually, of another teacher punching a kid," Brunson told TODAY in a conference room at 30 Rockefeller. "She has so many tidbits here and there that I kind of pull from. It's just stuck in my brain — everything that she's told me over the years and everything I've witnessed because I was with her so much at school."

The "Abbot Elementary" character Barbara Howard (Sheryl Lee Ralph) — the seasoned teacher often offering wisdom to the rookies — is molded after her mother. Brunson said her mom and the character both have a knack for getting through to misbehaving children.

Quinta Brunson on 'Abbott Elementary' being renewed for 2nd season

MARCH 16, 2022 / 05:50



"She always had a kid every year who would be the kid that caused trouble, but who would be her favorite," she said. "We would know who her favorite was by who she came home talking about who caused the most trouble. It was always this relationship like, 'Jamal gets on my nerves.' (Jamal) is the only name we'd hear all year and by the end, she's crying when he's going to first grade."

As a kid, Brunson would get in trouble for flipping around the house and unintentionally breaking things in her path. Her parents didn't punish her, but instead encouraged her exploration.

"My parents, they're solution-based people, so it was like, 'We're gonna put her in dance school,'" she explained. "So that kind of solved that problem. I didn't get in trouble for too long, because I had somewhere to go."

Redirecting kids as they advance in life is one of the reasons Brunson is passionate about education and kids. At one point, she even wanted to be a teacher herself.

"There was a point in time where I really considered it, but it didn't last long," she said. "It didn't go anywhere. My mom really wanted me to be one and I just knew it wasn't for me. I knew I didn't have the patience that it took ... *that* time."

'Real people who are choosing, most times, to do the most underpaid job in the world'

Originally from West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Brunson is now becoming a household name across the nation because of "Abbott Elementary," but her fame is not a story of overnight success.

The 32-year-old actor and writer first gained prominence as a meme before memes were really a thing, when a short skit of herself went viral back in 2014. From there, her humor and internet savvy landed her a job at BuzzFeed, where she worked for four years as a content creator. After leaving in 2018, she helmed a number of creative projects, including one pilot for the CW that was never picked up. She then worked on "A Black Lady Sketch Show," the animated series "Magical Girl Friendship Squad" and the third season of "Miracle Workers."

But "Abbott Elementary" is her triumph.

In the ABC-sitcom set in her hometown of Philadelphia, Brunson plays Janine Teagues, a novice teacher still holding out hope that the school district will provide desperately needed resources. Barbara Howard and Melissa Schemmenti (Lisa Ann Walter) are seasoned educators who have learned to lean onto their own tricks after countless instances of not receiving enough support from administrators. Along with long-term substitute teacher Gregory Eddie (Tyler James Williams) and history teacher Jacob Hill (Chris Perfetti), the group bands together when the shady principal — Ava Coleman (played by the hilarious Janelle James) — pulls stunts that are disadvantageous to the students.



"My mom really wanted me to be (a teacher) and I just knew it wasn't for me. I knew I didn't have the patience that it took, that time." **Raymond Liu / Getty Images**

Why teachers pick their career is one of two reasons Brunson made "Abbott" from the perspective of educators. The other reason is because until now, there's never been a school-based show told completely from this perspective.

"It's usually been half and half — half the students, half the teachers," she explained. "Usually, the show is bouncing between those people and more focused on students but I thought there was something really significant about going into teachers lives in a real way. Not in a jokey way that starts with our perceived comedy impression of them. That's what was compelling to me about doing this kind of show, because there's so much more to show: Real people who are choosing, most times, to do the most underpaid job in the world. What makes up that kind of person?"

That question compelled Brunson to create characters who had that same combination of fire, patience, kindness and stability.

"I knew I didn't have the patience to be a teacher," she said. "My mom did and that's so significant to know this is the job for you and you know what it takes in the long run to do it ... It's actually a really hard job that you have to have a lot of gall, hurt and emotional stability to be able to do. So if you can't do all of that, you're not going to be a good teacher. If you *can* do all of that, it's actually really special."





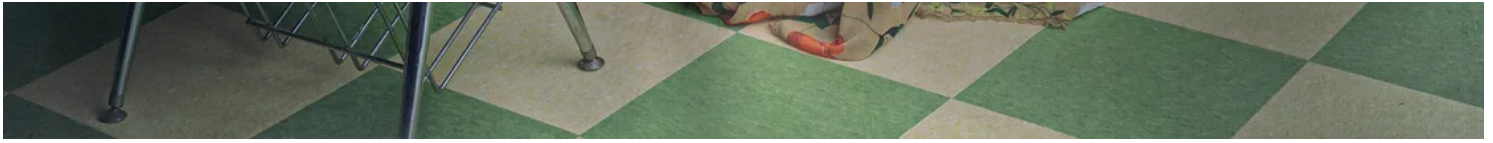
Originally from West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Brunson is now becoming a household name across the nation because of "Abbott Elementary," but her fame is not a story of overnight success. **Nathan Congleton / TODAY**

That's why, despite not having the patience before, Brunson wants to become a teacher one day.

Brunson once taught dance classes and said after her Hollywood reign, she wants to teach middle schoolers what she's learned in the industry: that content is "fascinating."

"It'd be cool to start teaching that to people younger than when they're in college," Brunson — who ended her studies in journalism and communication at Temple University early to pursue a career in comedy full-time — said. "If that could become a course even for middle schoolers because now they're so ahead of the game with digital stuff, it'd be beneficial for them to actually know the financial component behind all this, or just to know the actual business behind it."

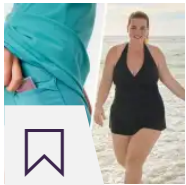




The cast of "Abbott Elementary." Pamela Littky / ABC

For now though, Brunson is booked and busy because "Abbott Elementary" was recently renewed for a second season. There's one question fans want answered: When is Janine going to dump her leach of a boyfriend and begin dating Gregory?

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"I don't know; we'll see ..." Brunson coyly said, before adding, "I have to say that."

The show returns March 22, 2022 after a three-week hiatus. Fancasts (fans predicting what will happen or what they want to see) have been circulating on Twitter of dedicated viewers wanting to see legendary actors Delroy Lindo or Tichina Arnold guest star on the series.

"What makes you think I can afford these people?" Brunson said in response to fans' demands. "That's what kills me."

But next week, she promises "there's someone in the show that people are going to be really excited to see."

'My heart on paper'

Brunson's support of education goes beyond warm childhood stories and a hit show predicted to become a cash cow. The marketing team behind "Abbott" redirected funds from the series to buy supplies for teachers and made them available in a renovated bus that doubles as a mobile lounge when they need a break. But Brunson wants to see more done from elected officials to pay teachers more and support public schools.

Average teacher salaries are shockingly low and while there's a lot of public support and commitments from elected officials to fund public schools, the problem continues. Brunson said, "Teachers should never have to want for anything."

She said we have yet to see change in droves in this area because it's "easy to talk about stuff to seem cool or smart" of the platitudes elected officials often preach, but it's another thing to actually make it happen.

In order to see any real action, "sometimes it takes a teachers strike to get that kind of effort," or otherwise make it clear that they will "not let up" on getting the funding they need.



"I definitely felt if 'Abbott' didn't get made, I thought I might have to quit." **Nathan Congleton / TODAY**

"Abbott Elementary" is raising awareness about these disparities and the real trials teachers go through. Memes and related Twitter threads regularly go viral on social media. She said she knew they were making a good show with impact but didn't know if it would reach people. Well, it is, and the warm reception has been a pleasant surprise.

"I'm just shocked," Brunson said. "This rarely gets to happen for a sitcom where everyone is (excited) for the first season. So I'm shocked about that but I do believe we made a good show. It's all warranted so yes, it's not *too* surprising. But it's just like, wow, this is what you dreamed of."

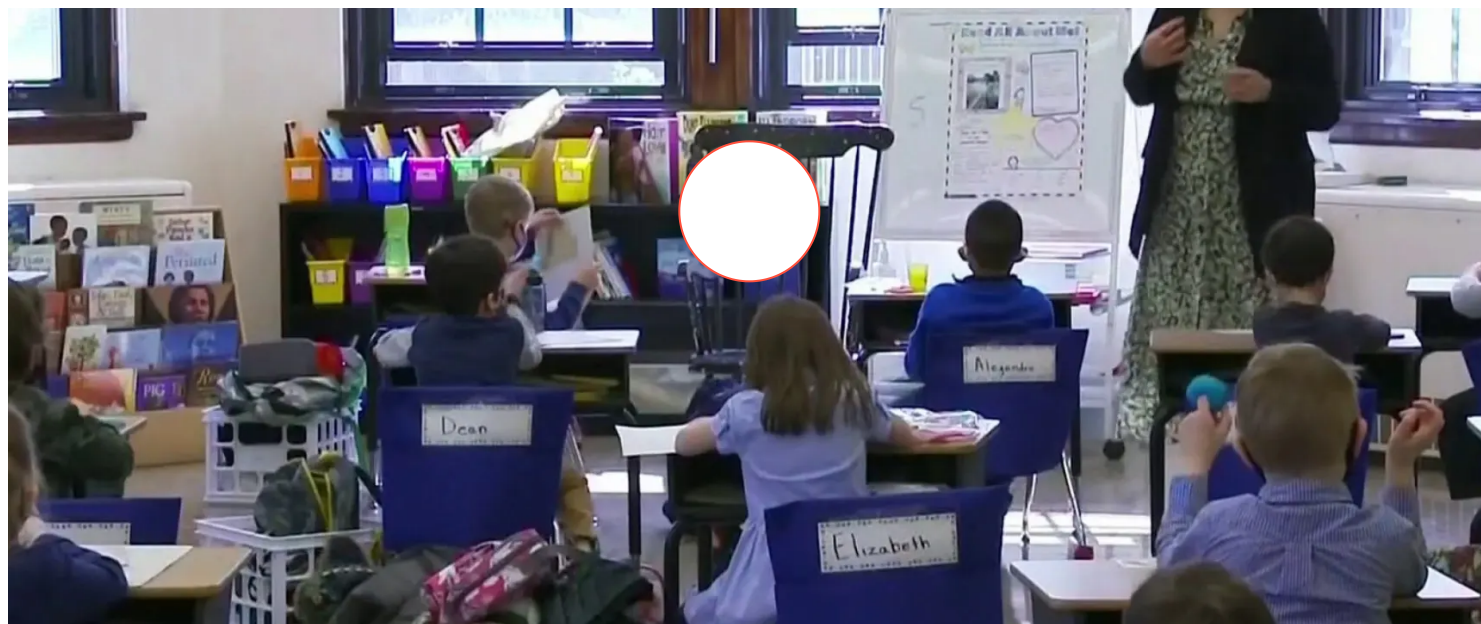
Brunson said the outpouring of support confirmed that she is walking in her purpose.

"'Abbott' is definitely a dream show. I definitely felt if 'Abbott' didn't get made, I thought I might have to quit," she revealed. "But I wasn't gonna *have* to quit. I probably would've called it quits because I knew it was the best I can do. It is good enough, and if for some reason this doesn't make it, then that's a sign that I need to redirect my energy elsewhere. Go where I will be loved and accepted.

"'Abbott' is my heart on paper. So I knew, this is it."

Teachers struggle as debate continues over teaching race during Black History Month

FEB. 17, 2022 / 04:34



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson is a reporter for NBC News' TODAY.com based in Brooklyn.

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TV

Erika Alexander says the 'Living Single' and 'Friends' debate deserves 'a larger conversation'

The "Living Single" star also reacts to Jennifer Aniston calling "Friends" "offensive."



"Living Single" cast (left) and "Friends" cast (right). Everett Collection, NBC

May 21, 2023, 11:16 AM EDT

By Randi Richardson

Erika Alexander says there needs to be "a larger conversation" about the ongoing comparisons between "Living Single" and "Friends."

Alexander, who played attorney Maxine Shaw on "Living Single," is responding to Jennifer Aniston's comments about "Friends" now being considered "offensive" due to more "sensitivity" and a new generation.

"I don't think anything about it is offensive," Alexander tells TODAY.com. "It's actually a fantastic show with a really good cast. I've enjoyed it on occasion."

Back in March, Aniston's comments about "Friends" caused quite a stir online, with some "Living Single" fans saying that the only thing they found offensive about the series was that it was "a direct rip-off" from Alexander's show. The "Living Single" alum says the newly reignited comparison debate about the two series is only a small part of the discussion that needs to be had.

"What I do think is that we have to have a larger conversation about how history is measured and for kids to tell those stories," she says.

To Alexander's point, the two shows have been compared for many years because of their similarities.

“Living Single,” which premiered in 1993 on Fox, aired for five seasons and ended in 1998. It starred Alexander, Queen Latifah (Khadijah), Kim Fields (Regine), Kim Cole (Synclair), John Henton (Overton), and TC Carson (Kyle) and followed them as they navigated the ins and outs of living in Brooklyn while occupying the same brownstone.

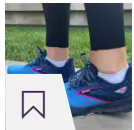
Meanwhile, “Friends” premiered in 1994 and ended in 2004 after 10 seasons. It starred Aniston (Rachel), David Schwimmer (Ross), Courteney Cox (Monica), Matthew Perry (Chandler), Lisa Kudrow (Phoebe) and Matt LeBlanc (Joey) and also followed their lives as six young men and women who lived in the same apartment complex, although in Manhattan.

Though the shows had similar cast structures and storylines, Alexander says the shows did not receive the same support from their respective studios.

"We can't say that back in the day, when that Black cast was in that show, including myself, that we had the same amount of branding and promotion, and leverage that they were putting on all the other shows underneath the same umbrella," she says. "It was totally different."

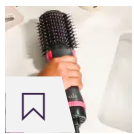
She also says that how studios go about deciding which projects are greenlit into production, and their specific budgets, warrants further scrutiny.

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"You can see where the budgets went, where you invest, and where you don't invest — where you take out," she says. "That needs to have not only a conversation, but an investigation. Because if we can see it, we don't have to repeat it. We can also know how and why those budgets went that way."

The production budget for the final season of “Friends” was \$10 million per episode, according to information obtained by NBC News. Of the \$10 million budget, each of the six main cast members received \$1 million per episode, [according to Yahoo Finance](#).

The production budget for each of the five seasons of "Living Single" was just over \$1 million per episode, show creator Yvette Lee Bowser tells TODAY.com. Show budgets typically increase with every new season renewal, but Bowser says that wasn't the case for her show.

"We had tremendous budgetary limitations," she says. "We were on a particularly lean budget and the reason we were given that was we were still part of a startup network, Fox, (and it) was still claiming new status."

Fox was founded in 1986. Living Single premiered seven years later. NBC was founded in 1926. "Friends" premiered 68 years later.

Alexander tells TODAY.com whether she holds resentment for "Friends" being credited for what "Living Single" pioneered.

"No, not at all because that's been the case all the time," she says. "We created blues, rock 'n' roll, all these new American art forms, and many of those people did not get their due in their time or effort. They died without any sort of honorifics."

She says the only reason she still discusses what happened with the two TV shows is so it's noted for the record.

"It's important that we know and we set the record straight, not just for Black people in the community, but for the wider American community," she says.



Randi Richardson

Randi Richardson is a reporter for NBC News' TODAY.com based in Brooklyn.

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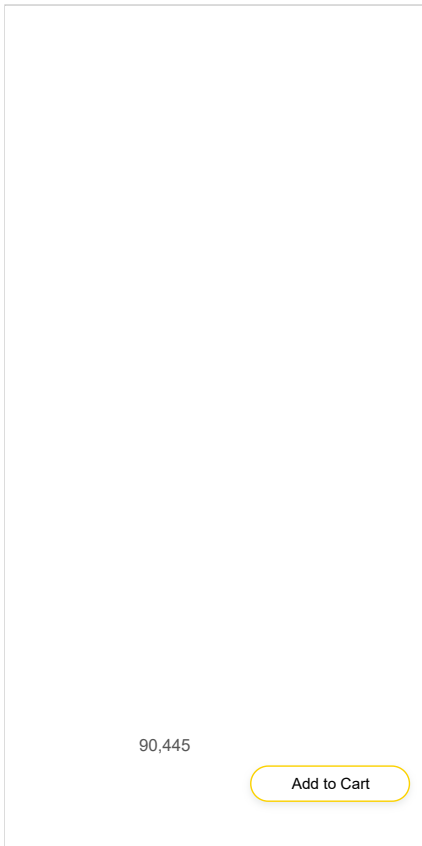
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