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Positive influence

Poet and author recalls inspiration she found in and around Stockton

On a recent morning, Terry a. O'Neal left behind the manicured lawns of her suburban Elk Grove home for the chain-linked fences and graffitied walls of south Stockton's Pock Lane.

There she visited the places that inspired her most: the small, worn house where she was raised; a nearby library named after fellow author Maya Angelou, one of many role models; Franklin High School, where, as a student, she met people who would pull her through the bad times and set her down on safe shores.

Growing up in south Stockton, among the sun-baked streets and corner markets, O'Neal found her voice.

Today she is 33, a writer, a wife and mother of four, and a motivator of youth. In a recently released book called "Literary Divas: The Top 100+ Admired African American Women in Literature," O'Neal is listed alongside literary greats such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, and publishers including Oprah Winfrey, for her willingness to let readers get under the skin she's living in.

"She is our superstar and extremely admired by the entire literary community," wrote Heather Covington, author of the compilation in an e-mail interview.

On Saturday, O'Neal will sign copies of her works at Bookland Bookstore in Stockton. In the fall, she will tour the West Coast, speaking to middle- and high- school students about the importance of reading and writing.

But her journey, she admits, began in south Stockton, a place where hope can wear thin.

"Stockton doesn't have a lot of positive role models, especially people on the south side, and it's only getting worse," O'Neal said. "Kids don't see beyond their environment."

The home she used to live in is now showing its age. Faded paint and shabby shrubs line its slightly sagging frame. O'Neal knocks on the door, but no one's home. She looks at the metal numbers nailed to the porch post. 2212. All of her memories had their start in this modest home.

"If I had the opportunity to buy this house, I would," she said. "When I'm feeling down, I just want to come back home and be a little girl again."

Growing up as the second oldest of four children, O'Neal was both a dreamer and a troublemaker, recalls mother Barbara Williams.

"Terry was just rough. She was a rough little kid," she said. "Yes, she was an experience and a half."

Despite their vastly different personalities, Williams tried to raise her kids with an appreciation for art and literature. Williams recalls the time a 6-year-old O'Neal met Angelou when the famed author came to the Stockton African art gallery, where Williams worked, for a book-signing.

Williams had no clue then the meeting would be a milestone in O'Neal's life; nor did she know her daughter would follow in Angelou's footsteps. It wasn't until she read the manuscript of her first book of poetry, "Motion Sickness," published in 2000, that Williams first understood O'Neal's true talent for the written word.

"It just took my breath away," she says of the manuscript. "It made me see what was inside her, (and) I had a deeper appreciation for her as a person."

The author remembers the emotional uncertainty she had writing "Motion Sickness." Newly married at age 18, she worked a full-time job by day and attended community college by night.

Even as she penned swift lines, her first baby swam and kicked inside her.

Her nerves were all but shot with the anticipation of being published. Would people read it? What would her words say about her?

The nerves were gone one year later when O'Neal published "The Poet Speaks in Black," a collection of inspiring pieces about family, self-esteem and black history and pride. Three other books, including a children's book and a novel for young adults, succeeded her first efforts.

The novel "Sweet Lavender," about a young girl whose world is turned upside down by her father's betrayal and abandonment of the family, mirrors O'Neal's own struggles with male figures in her formative years.

During a recent lunch break at the Sno-White Fast Foods on East Mariposa Road, one of her most beloved old haunts, O'Neal sips at a root beer. Her face is half-shaded by an awning as she looks across the road to the Big Value grocery store.

She remembers walking to the store one day as a teenager and being accosted by an older man who lived down the street from her Pock Lane home.

Just mentioning the incident brings up fresh memories of this man who, she says, had earlier raped her and stalked both her and her sisters. He ranks among a few men O'Neal counts as failed father figures - something she so desperately sought to fill the void in her heart left by a hard-working and often-absent father.

"I reached out to older men, and it turned my life upside down," she says.

The attack, her misadventures with a friend's father - these are things she doesn't tell everyone, things she lived with for years in silence. But she wants it to come into the light. O'Neal's next book, to be called "In a World of My Own," explores those dark spots in the author's life and heart. Writing it wasn't easy, she says, but the truth had to come out.

"It's to give all the different sides of my life," she said.

One of the people who helped the young O'Neal through the periods of darkness was her high school counselor Mable "Jimi" Choice, who joined O'Neal during visit to Stockton that included a trip to Franklin High's halls.

Affectionately called Ms. Choice by those who know her, the now-retired counselor admits to being a mother figure for many of the students she saw. "She was an open door, a refuge from the storm," O'Neal said, patting Choice's arm. "She always welcomes you in her home, always. It doesn't get better than this."

"I'm her other mother," Choice said, laughing.

In that role, the counselor saw O'Neal through things she couldn't have shared with friends and family members.

The author's gratitude is evident in a poem called " ... and the beat goes on." Dedicated to Choice, it speaks to all the strong women hewn from the places she knows as home.

"Voice of wisdom

she speaks

Bringing forth

A kaliedoscope of brilliant shades

Green, blue, red, purple, gold

Lyrical wonders unfold

she prances

Leaving behind footprints

In the sand

Placing her mark on the land."

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