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Entertainment & Life

Gilbert: Poet, screenwriter is struggling to heal from her loss, but she's determined to make mom proud

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Terry O'Neal's life has been on hold for the past month or so.

The Stockton native and Franklin High School graduate was working on a screenplay, an action drama, she hoped to shop around Hollywood and was finishing her fifth book of poetry, but all of that stopped when her mother, Barbara Ann Williams, was hospitalized at University of California Davis Medical Center.

She and her three siblings stayed with her mom around the clock for three weeks until Williams passed away on Feb. 22 from heart problems.

O'Neal is still healing from the loss.

Barbara Williams was only 67. She wasn't just a mom to her own children; she was a mom to other children in the neighborhood. At Williams' memorial, one of O'Neal's childhood friend remembered how Williams would invite neighborhood girls into her home at Eighth and Pock streets in Stockton and teach them to cook and sew.

Her passion for sewing helped the family make ends meet when finances were tough. O'Neal recalls Diamond Walnut workers going on strike, keeping her dad out of work. Her mom worked for the Department of Corrections, but she started creating pin cushion dolls to add to the income.

“She went into the garage and made the first doll out of an old shirt,” O’Neal recalled. “She found some buttons and broken jewelry, took cotton out of pillow and made the first doll with that. She was surprised how they took off.”

Friends at work started ordering them and Williams developed a little business, eventually creating a website for selling the dolls she created by hand, from painting the faces on wooden balls that served as the head, to sewing the dresses and applying synthetic hair.

It was a labor of love.

O’Neal said she does know how to sew and cook, if not as well as her mom, but the other lessons Barbara Williams passed along — reading and writing — definitely were ingrained in her daughter.

O’Neal, who wrote and planned her mother’s memorial service, has published four volumes of poetry, three children’s book and a young adult novel, “Sweet Lavender.”

She was in the process of turning the latter into a motion picture with her own independent film company when she went through a divorce after 28 years of marriage and three children, now 26, 24 and 21.

Pre-production had begun in 2012, locations had been secured in Louisiana and actors cast before the project was shut down on July 3, 2014.

“I had communities — they’re called parishes in Louisiana — because I have family and friends there,” said O’Neal, whose late mother moved to Stockton from Louisiana when she was 18. “They all joined in and donated property, stores, restaurants, homes for our main characters. It was land near the bayou. It was amazing. People came out in big numbers to audition.”

The coming-of-age story narrated by a 17-year-old girl, O’Neal said, will be made. She’s ready to get back to work on it once she finishes her action screen play.

She’s also re-writing “Sweet Lavender,” which was published in 2003 and now out of print.

“A publisher wants to publish the re-write of ‘Sweet Lavender,’” O’Neal said. “He wants to sell the rights overseas. Now, I’m working to rewrite the novel, because I want to change the voice to a more mature voice.”

The prep work having been done for the film version of the book, O'Neal said, means restarting production won't be as difficult. Locations had been secured, community members were behind the project and lessons were learned. O'Neal is hoping a production company will pick up the project. If not, she said, she'll produce it through her nonprofit organization — Lend Your Hand, Inc.: Educating the World's Children.

She's expanding that organization's operation to begin teaching the filmmaking process to participants she said.

O'Neal also continues to visit schools, conduct her Black History Trivia Bee and has edited several versions of "Make Some Noise! A Youth Poetry Anthology" for youth 12-18.

In 2017 O'Neal was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the wake of Hurricane Irma and the shooting deaths of three police officers there.

"Students wrote stories that were so powerful," O'Neal said. "They talked about how they felt, what they went through, watching people jump off roofs into the water and losing everything. It was so heartbreaking and so powerful. They had the opportunity to share their stories. The book was released in February (2018) and the kids made trending news. We had a book signing at the school. I think 70 some students were in the book. They were amazing. They got so much attention. Most of them don't want to be a writer or a poet, but being in the book gives them confidence, some hope to take the next step. They felt so accomplished, so proud."

Being a poet, first and foremost, is what O'Neal has long wanted to be. Sharing that gift with young people is just one more lesson she took from her mom.

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