

Single parents sacrificing to insure children's success

By Deborah Kohen
Sentinel-Voice

A single mom raising three talented children, Gem Wiltshire logs travel miles with the best of them, zipping from auditions, rehearsals and performances to even more auditions, rehearsals and performances.

Wiltshire — who keeps up a dizzying pace, working full-time at the Community College of Southern Nevada, producing monthly talent showcases and taking evening classes — is one of a new breed of parent: the single, on-the-go parent who goes wherever her children's interests take her.

Her daughter Serena Henry began singing and acting early and met with national success by the time she turned 8 years old. Her siblings followed, cultivating their own talents. Shanelle, 14, added violin and tap dancing to interests in acting and playing the piano, and Brian, 10, who specializes in power tumbling and gymnastics, carved out time enough to take up acting and tap dancing.

Serena's agenda takes a lion's share of



GEM WILTSHIRE

Wiltshire's time and money. A sophomore this fall at the Las Vegas Academy of International Studies and Performing and Visual Arts, the 15-year-old often flits from coast to coast auditioning for roles. Shanelle will be a freshman at the Academy in the fall. All three children often audition in Los Angeles.

Separated from the children's father and her family — all of whom live back East — Wiltshire laments the absence of a strong support system. A second paycheck, another pair of arms and feet and an additional car would ease her load. She credits faith with helping her carry the weight of single parenthood.

"It's God and me. I don't know if you (can) call that a single parent(hood)," she said. "God has given me a very strong will and I stay 'prayed up'."

Throwing herself into her children's interests has had consequences: no social life and a slew of credit card debt but, she said, "you do this because it's an investment in their future."

Support is an integral part of parenting, she said.

"As a teacher in New York I saw the difference between those kids who were supported and those who weren't," said Wiltshire, who bristles at the notion that children in single-parent homes are bound for trouble, insisting that single parents just have to sacrifice more. If there's a scheduling conflict, find a way around it. If the money isn't there, ask, borrow or work harder, she says.

"My kids have an interest in something that's wholesome and keeps them disciplined. It's what they become in the process - you can't put a price on that. They're committed. You need character and grounding, no matter what you become in life."

"It gets difficult some times but you have to have your principles and priorities in order," she said. "If I had it to do again, I'd do it exactly the same way, but I'd ask to have help."

Payment for her hard work comes when the curtain lifts.

"I feel grateful to God and proud" during the performances, she said.



Teenage singing sensation Serena Henry takes on a full load of performing engagements throughout the year. Her mom, Gem Wiltshire, above, keeps a watchful eye over career.

Father preaches active social life

Richard Thompson, known to audiences as "Richard T," said an active life kept him out of trouble and is doing the same for his children.

The 38-year-old has been involved with music since age 13. A guitar player, sound engineer and music producer, he owns a recording studio producing R&B, gospel, country and rap. His five children range in age from 6 to 17, with almost as many mothers, several of whom work with him in the studio. Though the arrangement is unorthodox, Thompson says everyone gets along fine.

Three of his children — Sandy Rose, Bosie and Sherdeh, ages 17, 14 and 12 respectively — are pursuing singing and dancing interests. Bosie hit the big screen six years ago as a dance double for a young Michael Jackson in the movie "American Dream" about the Jackson family.

The children's love of music can be traced directly to their early years when Thompson sang around the house. A musician himself, he travels a lot, but attends as many of their performances as he can.

Thompson said he supports his children's dreams. His philosophy: "Don't overlook (your children). Find out what they want to do and get behind them."

Superstar's mother used family, savvy

Mary Williams concurs. Her daughter Kameelah, having joined a church choir at age

6, began belting out solo performances by 8 years of age. Williams knew then that her daughter was going to be successful someday. She is.

Williams began grooming her daughters, Kameelah, now 20, and Toi, 25, by taking them to ballet and piano lessons. A single mom since 1981, she relied on family, friends and savvy to raise her daughters well.

Both girls succeeded. After completing a pre-med course and a B.S. in Biology at Virginia State U., Toi landed a job in a hospital in Hampton, VA and is considering going back to school. Kameelah graduated with honors two years ago from the Academy and is in the midst of a successful performing arts career.

The girls' father, who lives in Las Vegas, provided financial support and academic encouragement, leaving Williams to shoulder the parental responsibilities. She, too, credits divine help. The Bible has been her spiritual roadmap.

"God is the Potter, we are the clay," she said, "and He shapes us into what we were meant to be." Her faith taught her to trust in God, and trust has taught patience.

"Prayers for guidance aren't always answered right away," she said, "sometimes you have to be patient and wait."

When a recording studio opened its doors to then 13-year-old Kameelah, Williams learned she had to be patient with her daughter's career.

"She had the desire, but not the will," Williams said. "The hours were too long. I was patient. I knew it wasn't time yet (for Kameelah) (See Parents, Page 20)



RICHARD THOMPSON

Pioneering black photographer succumbs

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON — Days before he was to present a lifetime achievement award at a black photographers' ceremony, Maurice Sorrell, who captured the history of the civil rights movement on film and was the first black person to gain admission to the prestigious White House Photographers Association, died Tuesday.

He was 84.

The exact cause of death was unknown, but believed to be cardiac-related. He lived in Washington with his wife.

Sorrell's career spanned nine presidencies and more than two dozen countries.

His work carried him through the South during the height of the civil rights era, where he photographed the legendary march from Montgomery to Selma, Ala., led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sorrell worked as a news photographer for the Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., publisher of the black magazines *Jet* and *Ebony*, in its Washington bureau from 1962

until his retirement in 1993.

In 1961, he joined the ranks of the Washington photo elite as part of the White House Photographers Association. During an interview, Sorrell recalled the challenges he initially faced in gaining the acceptance of his peers.

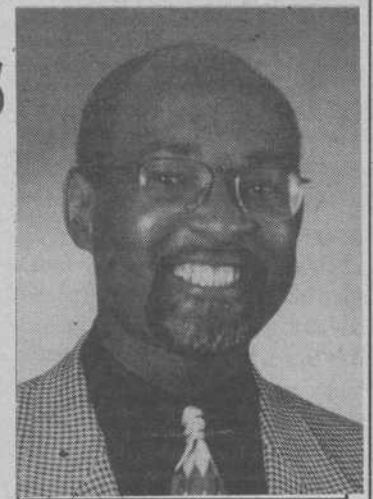
"They had a little thing where they would get arm and arm and try to push me back," Sorrell said. "Once they found out that I could shoot as well as they could, they accepted me."

Sorrell began photographing in 1946, shooting weddings and anniversaries.

He accepted a photography position at the Pentagon in 1955, but was only allowed to work in the darkroom because of racial segregation. He left two years later to work as a free-lancer.

Last year, Sorrell received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the African-American Photographers Association. He had been scheduled to deliver this year's award, now named after him, on Friday.

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