



P R E S S R E L E A S E

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COMMUNITY PAYS TRIBUTE TO NANA CAMILLE YARBROUGH IN RECOGNITION OF THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF AWARD-WINNING CHILDREN'S BOOK "CORNRROWS"

New York, NY - - The Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York (CBL), in partnership with **AKILA WORKSONGS, Inc.** (AW) presents a tribute to performance artist, activist, dancer, television show host, and award-winning author **Nana Camille Yarbrough**. The event is in recognition of the 30th anniversary of her landmark book, *Cornrows* and is sponsored by **The Black History Month Committee at Medgar Evers College/CUNY**. The tribute will take place **Friday, February 27, 2009** from **6:00 pm - 7:30 pm** at the President's Conference Center at Medgar Evers College (located at 1650 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11225). The program will feature a conversation between Nana Camille (as she is now affectionately called) and **Dr. Brenda Greene**, Executive Director of CBL; guest artist presentations, a slide presentation, and a 'question and answer' session. This is a family-friendly event and admission is free. For additional details, call 718.270.6976 or send an email to frontdesk@akilaworksongs.com. You may also visit www.ancestorhouse.net

Background

Cornrows, which received the **Coretta Scott King Award**, was inspired by a song Nana Camille wrote about the beautiful hairstyles she noticed in her community and abroad. She explains, "Young girls were making fantastic patterns in their hair. I was wearing cornrows all the time, too. Having done research I knew something needed to happen to preserve the culture." After writing a song entitled *Cornrows* and performing it on the television show "*Soul*," book publishers began to call Nana Camille and asked her to turn her song into a book. *Cornrows*, the book, was published in 1979 on the heels of the song being introduced to mainstream America.

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Also in 1979, actress **Bo Derek** wore the cornrows hairstyle in the popular movie "10." The movie introduced the hairstyle to general audiences across the country. Several artists and activists, including Nana Camille, were enraged about how cornrows were depicted in "10." Nana Camille explains, "The braids in the movie were attached to a wild style of life instead of showing what it was *really* attached to, African tradition." The history of the hairstyle was not largely known, even though African American actress **Cicely Tyson** had begun to wear cornrows for the television show "East Side/West Side" in 1963.

But the purpose of Nana Camille's book - today and thirty years ago - remains the same: to preserve and celebrate a historic hairstyle and to bring forth the facts about its origins. For example, when Africans were captured by European slave traders centuries ago, the prevailing thought was that they (the Africans) would return home at some point. "They would braid their hair with different patterns so that neighboring tribes would know where they came from and where to send them back to," teaches Yarbrough.

Today, cornrows often carry a negative stigma in mainstream America and specifically in corporate America. But recently **President Barack Obama** commented on natural hair in an interview with MTV, "Now you got locks...and my little girl have twists. To Malia and to me, it looks great. Obviously I would be upset if she were discriminated against on that basis."¹ Perceptions have changed about natural hairstyles and the book *Cornrows* played a significant role in helping to broaden one's view of natural African hair.

¹ MTV.com interview with Democratic Presidential nominee Barack Obama, November 2, 2008

About the Book

Cornrows is a nurturing story of Great-Grammaw and Mama telling their children how the beautiful styles and shapes of cornrows came from artifacts and ancient people in Africa to America. The book's lesson is summarized when the character Brother asks Great-Grammaw, "Did the spirit die?" Brother is speaking about the spirit of African people who now live in America. Great-Grammaw exclaims "No such thing! If you are quiet you can still hear the royal rhythms, still feel the spirit in the air." She continues joyously about how heritage and tradition are something that live inside African-American people even today. The book quickly turned into a curriculum reference for all children in schools nationwide.

Cornrows, written by Camille Yarbrough and illustrated by **Carole Byard**, was published in 1979 by Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc. It was re-published in 1996 by The Putnam & Grosset Group.

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About the Honoree

Nana Camille Yarbrough has a remarkable career in theater, film, dance, music and publishing. As a writer, she has published numerous essays and poems over the span of her forty-year career. As an award-winning children's book author, she has published four books: *Cornrows* (1979), *The Shimmershine Queens* (1989), *Tamika and the Wisdom Rings* (1994) and *The Little Tree Growin' in the Shade* (1996).

On the stage, Yarbrough has starred in **Lorraine Hansberry's** "*To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*" (1969). She was a member of the New York and national touring companies, as well as a member of the cast album. In film and television, she has appeared in soap operas, and in *Shaft*, the original movie (1971), among other credits

As a dancer, Yarbrough studied and performed with the world famous **Katherine Dunham Company of Dancers, Singers and Musicians**. She also taught dance and Africana Studies at Southern Illinois University and City College/CUNY in New York.

The Chicago native is an acclaimed recording artist as well. In 1975, she released *The Iron Pot Cooker* - a spoken word album that received stellar reviews. In 2000, one of the songs from that album (*Take Yo' Praise*) was covered by a British DJ **Fatboy Slim**. The international hit went on to be featured in commercials, movies, and television shows. In 2002, Yarbrough formed Ancestor House Productions and debuted a "song, story, music, dance" stage presentation by the same name. Her latest CD, also titled *Ancestor House*, was recorded live at Joe's Pub in New York City in 2004 to rave reviews. Today, Nana Camille lives in Harlem and continues to write, teach, lecture, and perform all over the country.

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