

# Hanging In Through It All

BY JOY JORDAN-LAKE

**Whether she's reaching out to at-risk youth in inner-city Boston, or treating the health of women recently released from slavery in Sudan, Gloria White-Hammond finds that she is "taking on things and getting through stuff that is very much not me as I've known me. I'd have to say, bottom line, it is really a sense of calling. Not me. Definitely not me!"**

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**A**s a pediatrician, Gloria White-Hammond is the person you call, whether you're officially filed as her patient or just her friend, to check out carnival-colored rashes on your toddler's leg. I've done it myself, both when I lived across town from her and after I'd moved well over a thousand miles away, and can testify that both her cross-Boston and her long-distance diagnoses (followed by dutiful reminders to see my own doctor) have never failed to be right.

As one of the pastors of her African Methodist Episcopal church, she is the person you consult on structuring effective Christian education for children. I've seen her, with one flip of a well-manicured hand, shed her professional poise and don dark shades to rap along with youngsters at the front of a sanctuary, youngsters who seemed actually pleased—no, ecstatic—to be spending a healthy hunk of their Sunday in church.

Among the nation's most innovative community leaders, she and her husband Ray Hammond, who is also a minister and medical doctor, are the people you invite to speak on how to reach and support urban youth. One group she birthed in the mid-90s, "Do the Write Thing," began by helping at-risk girls write and speak honestly about what they were experiencing,

and has since spawned numerous other support and guidance groups.

And as a seasoned mother who has successfully raised two daughters to stable and productive adulthood, she is the person you beg for advice when your own parenting seems to have foundered, or when you've ceased to trust your own judgment on how well the schools and neighborhoods and churches around you are serving their children—and teaching

them how to serve.



**Gloria White-Hammond** *learned that obeying God's call means "rising above my own inhibitions, which are many, and by the power of the Spirit going on out there."*

So if she sounds like the All-'Round Answer Lady for the nation's urban young, well, maybe she is, though she laughs aside any image of herself as a spiritual, medical, or child development guru, and prefers to speak of all her

varied professional passions as simply following a calling, step by step.

The calling to pediatrics, she recalls, came early in her own childhood: "I always had the sense that I wanted to go into medicine. I was one of those readers who spent lots of time in the library, and when I was around eight years old, there was this blue book called 'How to Become a Doctor.' I remember reading that and then deciding, 'That's it! That's what I'll do!' Fortunately, I didn't have parents who said, 'Are you crazy? Do you know that you're black and you're a girl? None of that stuff goes together.'"

Though her parents knew a different reality, they never discouraged her ambitions as a child, "so at no point along the way did it ever occur to me that I couldn't do it, which is really strange, because I never saw any physicians who were black, and certainly none who were women. Maybe that was just God's protection upon me, so that it never occurred to me I couldn't do it. By the time I got to college it was clear that this might be kind of strange, but I also went in that early wave in 1968. That's when there were a number of black students who were coming into universities, and the climate was receptive to promoting and supporting blacks moving into colleges, and into medical school. Again, I was aware that it was a special kind of effort for me to go in, but even then the timing was such that nobody was telling me, 'You're crazy.'"

This desire to break new ground, to change the world, is often taught to children by parents, she observes, though that wasn't necessarily true in her own development. "We were an Air Force family, a black family in a largely white area, a white context. You just really learned not to make waves. That's a part of my own personality, and I even now can see how it constrains me: let's not make waves, let's not have people dislike you because you're the only black kid. If you're not nice to them, nobody will like

you, and nobody will play with you. I still have this sort of Disease to Please, and it's overboard because it's driven by those early years of not wanting to be left out.

"So, yeah, all this ministry and activism is very much out of the box in terms of how I was raised, which is not to say that my parents frowned on service: service was a nice thing. But it wasn't like we saw that modeled. And actually if you have raised eight, nine kids, that's service in and of itself. My daughters, on the other hand, were raised in an activist family, so the fact that they object to this and picket that, that's what they were raised to do, to see stuff and take exception to it, and figure out how to address it."

In her own professional life, White-Hammond has learned to "take exception" to society's assumption that children raised in difficult circumstances will inevitably repeat the mistakes of their family or peer group. Part of that challenge gets lived out through an inner-city Boston pediatric clinic serving primarily Latinos and African-Americans, "just really devoted families," as she sums them up. "The neighborhood has changed quite a bit," she notes, "because it's become so heavily gentrified, but our families continue to come—sometimes a great distance. I still just really love those people; I love the privilege of ministering in their lives.... It's the whole business of connecting.

"I think that's one of the reasons I love pediatrics: you get so involved with entire families. I can watch my families grow. Yesterday I had a conversation with one of my mothers whose daughter is a sophomore at Bryn Mawr. I'm so proud of her because I remember when I could hold this little preemie in my hand. I know her story; I can remember points along the way. That's just so special as a pediatrician, to be able to come alongside these families and touch them. So it's great, though not everybody does well obviously. I've got some horror stories along the way as well, but even then, somebody has got to stay beside the horror stories, too. Somebody has got to be there even for them because one day they're going to wake up, and they're going to get it. They need to be able to see somebody who connected with them even when they were in the gutter. And that's me."

Her voice drops an octave, becomes huskier as she recalls one of the tougher journeys. "One of my girls I'd known since she was in grade school. She was sexually abused by her stepfather and when the information was disclosed, her mom basically had to choose between the girl and the stepfather, and the mom chose the stepfather. So the girl was fostered for many years, and it was just horrible, horrible, horrible. And she was such a bright girl. She was a troubled teenager, you can imagine, but we got attached from when she was really young. My daughters and I went to a couple of her volleyball games just to encourage her, and then after she

graduated, that's when she started going way down the tubes. She was hooking for a while, just kind of here, there, and everywhere.

"She got a little bit into the church, a little bit out of the church, and about three years ago she had a child by a man she just kind of chose to be the father. But she's doing really well with the child. She's back in a good relationship with her mother, and the stepfather is gone—hopefully under the planet somewhere. I've seen her begin to regroup. She's not doing everything I'd like her to do: she's not saved and sanctified and in the church, but she's building a decent life for her and her child. She just had so much potential. I know if she'd had a different set of circumstances, she would have been in law school and she would have been a great lawyer, but it didn't work out that way. I have families like that, but then I have other girls who just make it. Sometimes, you don't know how they make it, but they do. That's what I really love, just being there in the valleys and the mountain highs."

But merely in her role as a pediatrician, White-Hammond could not always assist in those "valleys" for at-risk kids as fully as she longed to do. Her frustration helped create another avenue for helping them—and, in the process, probably helped clarify her own calling as a minister. "In my medical practice, I was seeing so many girls who seemed to be lost, and I was feeling like I wasn't able to do enough. I was feeling confined by the practice, since I only had them for a minute. While I had them, we could hear each other and we could meet each other in that place, but then they'd go off and there would be all those other people they would hear, people who would speak far more loudly and far more consistently than I. So, I looked for another venue to connect with them.

"It wasn't necessarily starting out with a plan that says, 'In January of 1994, you'll start a girls' group.' It wasn't like I planned to do it other than seeing a need, and trying to get a sense from God how to respond to the need.

"I was interested in writing as a way of expressing my feelings, and thought we might offer this as a tool for the girls. One of the members in our congregation was a professional writer, and so I sold the idea to her. Our initial plan was to meet on a weekly basis with the girls: we'd get them there, and we'd get them home again. As it turned out, it just became apparent that we would need to be even more involved in their lives, in a much more comprehensive way, so we started adding more and more components. That's the way it evolved.

"It's called 'Do the Write Thing,' but they do much more than write. We have two people at the church who are full-time doing the girls group. The director is a social worker, and brings a host of other skills to the ministry that I wouldn't necessarily have; there's another person who does drama with them. They're involved in a church program outside the

church, and two programs that are in two Boston public schools, and then another program for girls who are in the Division of Youth Services facilities. It's still going strong. I'm really grateful to God for that."

Without airbrushing the past, White-Hammond recalls some of the hard-won triumphs of *Do the Write Thing*: "In our very first group was a girl named Tanika, who definitely had her ups and down and ins and outs. When we first started working with her, she was probably about fourteen, so she might have been in the ninth grade. A lot of working with these girls is just hanging in through all of their changes, and not getting discouraged. There are plenty of places along the way to get discouraged because they're dropping out of school, getting high, and coming to church high. I remember she was involved with some guy, really a domestic violence case, a really troubled guy. When she was writing, you could hear: it was clear he was beating her. We had to get the word out that she was one of our girls, and that Reverend Hammond was looking for this guy, and that's how we had to deal with that.

"One summer we got the girls jobs in collaboration with our church, John Hancock Insurance, and the Boston police. Tanika eventually got her degree, went through Job Corp, and then went back to work for John Hancock. She's got benefits now, and people working under her. And she's kept in touch with her men-

tor. Just two weeks ago, she and her boyfriend organized a peace march at the city. I'm just so encouraged, because I remember this girl when she was just, you know, 'Is she going to make it? Are we going to make it?' But she's one of our girls; one of our success stories. You can't spot your success stories right away; they're not intuitively obvious. You just sometimes have to wait—which is, of

course, what God does for us. He waits until we get it, and keeps hanging in with us through it all. That's the definition of grace."

Gloria White-Hammond has one answer, and only one, to how a child like her grew up to be the woman she is, with all the richness and craziness of her life: "I have learned, and I don't hear God perfectly, but I have learned over the years how to discern his voice. I continue to learn how to just go ahead and do it: just go. It just kind of gets down to that, having

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this very clear sense of calling, rising above my own inhibitions, which are many, and by the power of the Spirit going on out there.”

By way of example, she points to her recent work in creating a non-profit organization assisting Sudanese women, recently released from slavery, with both health care (including HIV concerns) and micro-enterprise loans for starting their own businesses. “When I first went to Sudan, I certainly would not have had it in my spirit to plan to go back. It was sort of ‘Okay, we did this; we’ll pass the word and let people know what the situation is, and that will be that.’ But I had this uncanny sense that I needed to go back, and as time went on it was clear that this was the piece the Lord wanted me to take on.”

Again, she points to her childhood to contrast her personal tendencies with divine calling. “I don’t like getting dirty; I never did like getting dirty. I didn’t make mud pies as a kid because I didn’t like to get dirty. And I don’t like to eat chicken with my fingers because then your fingers get dirty. Dirt does not work for me. And of course here I am in Sudan: you can’t bathe for four or five days, and when you do, you’ve got a little basin with a couple inches of water, and that’s supposed to do the whole job. I don’t like using nasty toilets, but of course here in Sudan there are no toilets—it’s a hole in the ground. Bugs fly in and bugs fly out while you’re using it, so this cannot possibly be Gloria. I don’t do bugs. There are LOTS of bugs there.

“So in all these areas, I’m taking on things, and encountering things, and getting through stuff that is very much not me as I’ve known me. I’d have to say, bottom line, it is really a sense of calling. It’s not me. Definitely not me.”

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