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>> Hello. I'm Sheryl Cannaday from the Library of Congress. The National Book Festival is in its seventh year and it has attracted tens of thousands of book lovers of all ages to the nation's capital to celebrate reading and lifelong literacy. This free event is sponsored and organized by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. This year the Festival will take place on Saturday, September 29th on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Festival goers will meet and interact with 70 bestselling authors, illustrators, and poets. There will be activities for the entire family. If you're unable to attend in person, we invite you to experience the Festival online. Our podcast interview series with well known authors, along with webcasts from the Festival will be available through the National Book Festival's website at [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest). Many people know today's guest from her roles in film and on television as the feisty Drucilla Winters on the daytime drama, *The Young and the Restless*, and smart Amanda Bentley on *Diagnosis Murder*. Her talents also extend to dancing professionally with several ballet companies. However, to truly know the person behind the public face, you will need to read her critically acclaimed memoir, *The Women Who Raised Me*, which is on the New York Times and Essence Bestsellers list. Welcome, Victoria Rowell, award winning actress --

>> Thank you so much.

>> And now author. It's a pleasure to have you with us today. Now your book --

>> Well, I thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited about the National Book Fair.

>> Well, we are too. Why do you think it was important for you to participate? I know your fans are thrilled.

>> Well, it's important for me to participate because the book, of course, for me was always about more than writing a book and selling books. I have not only a domestic message but an international one in that mentoring, fostering, adopting children, which are at pandemic levels I might add, is very necessary. And clearly American people have stepped out, not only my strong supporters in the acting arena, but have stepped out to purchase the book and support the message. And so I'm cresting at 100 days on the road since April 11th and I just wanted to thank everyone who's come out with flowers and especially the hugs in support of my memoir, *The Women Who Raised Me*.

>> Now, your book is a tribute to the women who played starring roles in your life. You described --

>> Yeah.

>> it as a self journey and a conduit actually for your emancipation. What inspired you to take this journey?

>> Well, I mean what inspired me was that it was a goal of mine -- I won't even call it a dream because I had intended to write the book. But it's an homage to these extraordinary women who you would look up and say, well, these are ordinary women. They were farmers; they were teachers; they were social workers; they were respite caregivers which is weekend caregivers in the foster care system; they were mothers, wives, some having ten children of their own. I wanted to write the book and I wanted it to be published while many of them were still alive so that we could celebrate together and also show that mentoring happens where you sit or stand. You don't need a tremendous amount of money. You don't need a lot of money at all. You just have to have willingness and really give the real estate in your heart for another person. And so I wanted people to know that these people do exist. It's not always the dismal -- it's not always about the dismal headlines we read about about foster care. I wanted to show the positive side of what happens and my story is not unique. There were many -- there are thousands upon thousands of people that have also benefited from this kind of mentoring.

>> How did you become a ward of the State of Maine?

>> I became a ward of the State of Maine by virtue of my mother's illness. She suffers from schizophrenia and she never thought that she would be separated from her children because of her illness. She had not been diagnosed at that time. But she was about to give birth to me. I would have been -- I was her fourth child at that time. And she -- I'm sorry. I was her fifth child. I apologize. I was her fifth child at that time which goes to show how long she was suffering as a mother. But it was made apparent that I would be immediately placed into care which I was at the hospital.

>> Now I gather that your foster mother wanted to adopt you but she couldn't because you were of another race.

>> Yes. State law in the State of Maine dictated that children who were of a brown race could not be raised, adopted, fostered or otherwise by a white family. And I from the beginning was met with very intrepid, you know, indomitable women who broke the law essentially. There were three women who banded together in Gray, Maine, European women and they took care of me for two and-a-half years. Government later swooped in, the Department of Human Services swooped in and removed me from that household when they found a black family. All of it, of course, was unfair and very painful. I remained in touch with those families directly and indirectly. Some of the women had passed on. One of the women in particular had passed on, my first mother, Bertha Taylor. But the other two women remarkably were still alive and we were reunited over 30 years later. Yeah. It brought closure for all of us because they all tried, one failed in adoption, the other picked up. They thought they could perhaps convince the system. They appealed to the governor at that time. The year that I was born there were four governors. I think unprecedented that there were four different governors in one year. And they appealed to the governor and they really kicked up some dust in Augusta but to no avail. But it was, I think, the beginnings of, you know, the fight that still remains in me for equality.

>> How did you deal with racism and prejudice growing up especially when it came from your own family?

>> I dealt with racism and injustice especially having to deal with it in my own family for that very reason. Because I think when a child is -- I mean everyone is born with openness and hope. And when you are shown in very short order that you are not included, there is a very obvious exclusionary behavior, I think one of two things can happen. A child can feel defeated or a child can rise up against it. Given the mentoring framing and I was given tremendous mentoring and I was given a sense of self by my primary foster mother, Agatha Armstead, and so she told me and taught me my importance and significance. And, you know, that was I think my forest because she said regardless if you're not included in a circumstance, you just certainly go around it, create your own. And so I learned that from her to create my own world which I did.

>> How did the women who raised you prepare you for your own children, for motherhood?

>> The women who raised me prepared me to raise my own children by virtue of their example. And they were all mothers themselves as I mentioned. And they all had a sense of humor; they were all wise; they were all business women in their own rights whether they were canning vegetables or whether they were teaching ballet classes or staying at home, head of household, they all had their own ingredients if you will that they imparted to me. And foster children typically are not left in the will. But my inheritance most assuredly is all of the gifts that these women imparted to me by way of the lessons. I took all of that and, of course, I imparted that to my children the best way that I have known how to. And I have a very strong relationship with my two children. My daughter is 18 and my son is 11. They understand that I grew up in foster care but they -- I told them they don't ever have to understand my life because my life is not their life. We're all individuals. They understand the importance of the work that I do in foster care and that's all that I can ask of them and to be considerate of those who have less. And I think by virtue of what I've demonstrated and my involvement in foster care and adoption, they are young humanitarians, no question about it today.

>> Did they talk to you about your book? Did they tell you --

>> Well, my son's 11 so where, you know, he saw me working away on the book -- I dedicated two rooms in our house to the book. Our breakfast room which was completely filled with all of my research material and, of course, my computer was set up there; it was where I took meetings, and my office. My daughter, where she knows a lot of the history, it made her, you know, it made her cry because it's one thing to tell my children the stories; it's another thing to read the fine detail in your own time. And she's very -- they both are very proud of me and they've told me that they're proud of me. And it's given them, especially my daughter, another level of awareness in reading this book as an 18-year-old young lady. Because at 17, I was living in New York on my own. And no matter how many times she's heard that it has a whole other relevance to her reading this story because it's framed with so much else.

>> Well, it's certainly a wonderful legacy to give your children.

>> Thank you.

>> What enabled you to finally embrace your mother, Dorothy?

>> I'm sorry. What enabled me --

>> to finally embrace -- what enabled you to finally embrace your mother, Dorothy?

>> Oh, I always embraced Dorothy, my natural mother. I held no resentment against her whatsoever and that is due to the miracle of the mentoring I got from my foster mother, Agatha Armstead. Agatha Armstead, long before the Administration of Children and Family Services or the Department of Human Services came to the phrase, wraparound services, was doing so. And so without any permission whatsoever she invited, after many conversations and a lot of planning, she allowed for Dorothy Mabel Collins Rowell to visit us and stay with us in our house in Maine for short periods of time and also organized other visitations and also definitely encouraged correspondence and that's how I began to write. She encouraged us to write our mother because she believed no matter what -- I don't care if a mother is in prison or a mother is ill or a mother is trying to recover from any kind of addiction, a mother wants to know where her children are. And she explained that to me at six. And I learned very early because she had the courage to know that her own mothering was secure enough that she would have no -- I'm trying to think of the word -- she would have no concerns about me becoming perhaps adverse to her mothering me. Even at the age of six, many people have -- they feel a bit intimidated in opening up that door to finding the natural parent or introducing the child to the natural parent, but not Agatha. She felt it was essential to my growth to know my natural mother and to understand, to witness, to see her, to understand this is why you are in my care. And when I laid eyes on Dorothy, I understood instantly that I was in the right place, that Dorothy had done the right thing. Because Dorothy, I won't give away the book, but that Dorothy always wanted me to be with Agatha.

>> Of all the women you talk about in your book who had the most dramatic influence on your development? Was it Agatha Armstead?

>> Agatha Armstead was the most dramatic in my development. It was certainly because of the long term mentoring that she gave me and the love. And just the contiguous years of care that she provided, the lengths that she went to. Because she was born in 1903, she was a senior citizen when she was taking care of me. She did go back to work in a social security office in Massachusetts, in Roxbury, Massachusetts at Dudley Station so that she could bring in extra income to keep me and to provide the things for my sisters and I that we needed as growing teens. She was just the most selfless committed person that I have ever met. I have met other people who have been also very, very influential in my life, have been very caring in my life and people that I turn to to this day but Agatha Wooten Armstead was my far the most influential.

>> You describe Latanya Richardson Jackson, a fellow actor and wife of actor Samuel L. Jackson as not only a close friend but an enlightened mentor, earth mother, and soul sister. I understand from reading your book that she was there at a critical time in your life. Can you tell me about that?

>> Yes. Latanya Richardson Jackson is an extraordinary actress from public theater in New York City with Joseph Papp to Broadway and we share that most definitely and we also share the love of our children and love for each other in that wonderful sisterhood that comes about as adult women. She's someone that I can lean into who I refer to as not stick furniture. And when I allowed myself to, as I've described, become still it was a time of tremendous reflection. I had not allowed myself to feel my life, this life that I had lived. I had always been working and running and perhaps running away from my reality, not really assessing what all had happened. And I think that that has its place as well because children like myself that do have a focus as was my anchor in classical ballet, that is a survival element in our existence. It certainly was for me. When I allowed myself to become still, I became terribly depressed. And it was Latanya that it was her voice that I heard. She's very sure footed; she doesn't mince words; she gets to the point; and she not only offers comfort but she also insists on doing the work, physical labor. And it was her voice and it was her strength that I leaned into during this very difficult period.

>> Before people read your book, they probably look at you and say she has it all; she's been blessed. But you've also had struggles. How have you dealt with the good and the bad?

>> Well, the good and the bad are a necessary. The good and the bad it's part of life and you can't have all good. It's not realistic. When the bad comes that's when you have to walk the pathless path and walk through the gateless gate as I define it. And you do walk in faith and so it is the faith that I hold that sustains me and sustained me in the past. That is not to say that we don't fall upon times where faith is thin and hope is anorexic. But I have had it and I still do and it is my faith. And faith comes in all -- an assortment of colors and shapes and beliefs and I'm not going to go into that. But it is simply that thing inside of us. Sometimes it's just a flicker of light. You just have to keep the flicker of light burning and it has been the tiniest of flames that has kept me afloat. And I reached out to friends. I had to learn to trust and coming out of foster care that's very hard to do because we trust very little. And it does affect our adult relationships but I've had to work through that. None of us can survive living in a silo, none of us. No matter how strong we believe we are or people say we are, we have to know that as I say, none of us does it alone or can do it alone living in a silo.

>> You have expressed yourself through your acting, dancing. How is writing different?

>> Oh, I love that question. Well, dancing is my first passion. It's something that's been in me innately since I can remember since the age of six which I described how I bore holes in my sneakers trying to stand on toe living on that farm in Maine. It is still the greatest expression

of my artistic self. I have had these other incarnations that have been so incredibly cathartic for me. Teaching classical ballet to inner city students. And then, of course, acting has been an enormous gift and now writing in a published sense. As I said I have been writing for a long time. Writing, you just go on this journey and it's [inaudible] it's never linear. And you're just writing and now I'm writing fiction and it gives me an outlet to express another voice within this gift that God has given me which is art. And I don't believe it's an accident that I have been given this abundance of artistic expression because I believe when the earth, God, universe knows that I'm a conduit for bigger message. Not only my own but the importance of literacy, the importance of artistic expression for children who come to this country. Let's say, for example, into Portland, Maine from Sinagoga, from Darfur who go to Maine, cannot even speak English but look to art in public schools so they can express their sorrow. And it was that very truth for me in classical ballet to be able to show up to a ballet class underwritten by the Ford Foundation or the National Endowment for the Arts but to be able to go every day, have my car fare underwritten. There was no way I could go without the car fare even underwritten and know that I could hold on to a ballet bar for fear of life and know that that was my temporary haven. And so the writing is just an extension for me to say one more time that, yes, no matter what walk of life you come from, honor what gifts you have. We all are ordained when we are born. You have to hold on to it.

>> Well, that's certainly very inspirational. Now what advice do you -- would you give inspiring writer interested in composing their own memoirs?

>> Well, beginner writers, first of all, I would say reconcile any part - especially with a memoir, we're talking about nonfiction, reconcile any discrepancies or any unsettled internal battles you may have so that you can liberally. Because honesty is tantamount to telling the best story that you possibly can. That's number one. Number two, write even most definitely without a publishing deal. I certainly did. It took me a very long time to bring this book full circle and I registered a story about The Women Who Raised Me in the early 1990s with the Writers Guild of America. And you just file away your story and hold on to hope, share your stories with people that you know have a love for the literary so that you might get some criticisms along the way. And all along ask questions. Who do you recommend as a literary agent? Is there someone that might be able to plug me into publishing world? And then, of course, if you're going to self publish, you really must do the research and do it well because it's one thing to self publish; it's another thing to distribute. Understand that self publishing and self distribution must be a marriage because who wants to self publish 5,000 books that never go anywhere. Anyone who's serious about writing the books and, yes, I'm an actress and, yes, people might have had a misconception oh, this is a celebrity that's writing a book and, you know, she'll do her three weeks with -- on television prep and be gone which, of course, we all know is not the case for me. I'm passionate about whatever I do. I put a lifetime of study behind classical ballet. I've treated nothing else that I've been interested in any different. And so with my writing, which I have been doing since I was nine years old, I have put the same level of passion behind. Some people have been surprised. My God, you're a

television and film actress; we weren't expecting this. But I became an actress in my late 20s. It's not all that I have done and it's certainly does not define who I am. And so I say all that to say when you write a book, you have to plan out for the integrity of your intellectual property to go on the road with your intellectual property. You are married. Once you put pen to paper, you are married not only to telling the story but then promoting the story. And I got behind my book tour which has now taken me out to 2008 and that is I know unprecedented. But as I say it's very important for the author to show up physically with their intellectual property. And I can't implore future writers and writers who have books already, don't throw your hands up and say, oh, you know, I don't know why my book didn't do well? Well, you have to ask yourself why are you sitting in Martha's Vineyard at a barbecue when maybe you should be on the road. You have to ask yourself why are you sitting home instead of being on -- you have to reconcile with that fact that if you are not there to do the press behind your book, and I'm not talking about flashy CBS This Morning, The View, Oprah press. I'm talking about getting into public libraries, going into schools, think outside the box. Get people to underwrite a hundred books at a time before you go do a speaking engagement. Go into prisons. Do things that are civic minded, that grow the spectrum of literacy and move the book at the same time.

>> Well, I'm sure your fans are really glad that you feel the way that you feel, that you're out there promoting your intellectual property. Your website says courage, hope, inspiration, strength. Are those the words that best describe you?

>> I would have to absolutely say yes. You have to be courageous in life and courage doesn't mean, you know, fighting. Courage means standing for what you believe in when no one else is flanking you with that same spirit. Courage means walking alone if necessary. There's no room, you know, for fear. One has to believe in what one believes in. And I've, you know, I'm going to paraphrase because I don't believe that -- there's a quote of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton's book, Living History. And she says, "Fear is always with us but we just don't have time for it, not now." And I love that quote because it's true. I mean Marian Wright Edelman with the Children's Defense Fund, Dr. Dorothy Height, so many intrepid women who have fought the good fight and I'm certain in the beginning alone. So, yeah, I'd have to say my website defines who I am, what I stand for. I want to encourage our listeners and our readers to log on to [www.victoriarowell.com](http://www.victoriarowell.com) to see where I'm going next on the book tour, The Women Who Raised Me book tour. I have had it up since April 11th. I've received around three million hits already and I really appreciate the outpouring support around the issue that is defined in my book and the courage. My story is an American story. My story is about what we can do if the willingness is there.

>> Well, Victoria, thank you so much for being with us. We look forward to hearing more from you in the Hohman Family Pavilion at the National Book Festival on Saturday September 29th on the National Mall from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a list of the participating authors, visit [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest). Thank you for listening.

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