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Area woman believes she can save the world one person at a time

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Lawson Bush IV of Pomona, listening to his then 12-year-old child counsel a friend through a personal crisis, said "Girl, you think you can save the world."

That idea didn't seem far-fetched to the altruistically inclined adolescent. The Rev. La Quetta Bush-Simmons of Fontana was convinced then and still believes she can change the world, one person at a time.

"I want to dig beneath the surface of what people are saying, see their real need and respond to that need or concern," said Bush-Simmons, now executive director of Pomona's Transcendence Children and Family Services, a nonprofit agency focusing on the needs of abused, abandoned and neglected children in foster care and courts' protective custody.

Bush-Simmons is so well known for the purity of her motivations, development consultant Mary Kashmar of Claremont calls her "the touchstone."

"When we're looking for guidance, the best road, the journey to take that is the right way for our children and the health of our communities, we look to La Quetta," Kashmar said.

"She is the foundation, the touchstone, for what we do in our community," Kashmar added.

Even if she didn't have strong spiritual values about serving humanity, Bush-Simmons might find it tough to escape traditions of caring that have prevailed in her family for five generations. She also chose a husband, the Rev. Kelvin Simmons, because he believes anyone and everyone can correct the ills befalling families and children.

Her great-grandmother, Lou Albert Egnew, was born in 1900, long before governmental agencies formally formed foster-care systems and homeless shelters.

"If you were homeless, you could live in her house," Bush-Simmons recalled. "No one ever went hungry around her. My mother remembers all kinds of people lived in my great-grandmother's house. They found love, encouragement and healing there."

Visits to grandmother Annie Catherine Phelmuns' home always involved enjoying good food. And eating it wasn't restricted to relatives. Bush-Simmons, her sister Regina Bush-Dean and brothers Dr. Lawson Bush V and Dr. Edward Bush accompanied their grandmother and other elders to deliver plates and platters of food to needy families in the neighborhood.

Her parents, Lawson IV and Catherine Bush, chose education as the best way to serve children. But they went past classroom and administrative duties to buy clothes and food for impoverished students. She remembered her father passing a motorist whose car had broken down. He took the stranger to the parts store and bought the vitally needed repair item.

When a friend's grief about a relative's death was aggravated financial hardship preventing her from flying to the funeral, Regina charged airline tickets on her credit card to get everybody there. Her brother Lawson had already started the Imani Academy to augment Inland Valley children's cultural and academic education, but he and Ed thought they ought to do more. So they walked their neighborhood, knocking on doors, introducing themselves and telling people "if you ever need anything, we're there."

"A few days later, a guy came to the house and needed food. Lawson took him to the grocery store and bought food for the man and his family," Bush-Simmons recalled.

The younger Lawson and his wife, Tonia, will travel to Ghana soon with the nonprofit group House of Amen Ra to begin building seven community libraries there. Sister-in-law Jenise Bush, Edward's wife, co-founded Powerful Praying Wives, a San Bernardino nonprofit sponsoring workshops and conferences to empower wives and preserve families.

The Bush clan adopts needy families for Thanksgiving and Christmas. The females in the family recently donated money to furnish and decorate a bedroom in the Transcendence transitional house for young women leaving foster care at age 18 with no place to go.

Bush-Simmons was a counselor at the LeRoy Haynes Center for Children and Family Services in La Verne when she met her future husband, Kelvin. His good looks helped catch her eyes, but it was his caring for the welfare of troubled children that focused her heart on loving him.

She and her husband, both ministers at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in Pomona, still care for children beyond their own, Kandace, 6, and include others in their circle of concern.

"Service to humanity is a tradition in our family. We can't and don't want to escape that tradition," Bush-Simmons said.

"When I leave this Earth, I want to know I've helped as many people as I possibly can," she said. "It might be just listening to somebody, giving them a dollar for food, offering encouraging words, but it must be something."

Born in Columbus, Miss., 40 years ago, Bush-Simmons is the oldest of four children. The examples of elders set the stage for discipline, love, spiritual values and community service for her and her siblings. They all chose careers enabling them to give back: La Quetta as a human and children's services administrator; Regina as a human resources' consultant; Lawson V, a Cal State Los Angeles professor; and Edward, Riverside Community College's dean of students.

The family moved from Mississippi to Pomona when she was 5. She attended Harrison Elementary, Palomares Middle and Pomona High schools, then did

undergraduate studies in anthropology at UC Irvine. She also did a year of postgraduate work in pastoral counseling at International School of Theology.

"Anthropology let me focus on people, their development, cultures and traditions, but I also took a lot of psychology classes in college," she said. "I had a passion about understanding the workings of the human heart and mind. I wanted to know why people do what they do, think the way they think, act the way they act.

"I've always thought people are deeper than the surface of what they present to others," she reasoned. "If you dig deep enough and really listen, you'll discover what they are really all about and the core of their feelings."

Bush-Simmons is rooted in the support of her intergenerational family. That fact helps her overcome others' bad treatment, personally and professionally, and become imbued with hope rather than succumb to bitterness.

When mistreated or dealt with unfairly, she considers her humanity and character rather than focus on those who wrongfully misuse her.

"Do I walk away bitter or do I forgive?" she said about the questions that first popped into her mind. "I had to learn that people can say they're kind and not be and that sometimes wolves masquerade in sheep's clothing.

"My ability to forgive, not necessarily forget, has to do more with my spiritual convictions than the attitudes and actions of others," Bush-Simmons diplomatically said about negative experiences she encountered as an administrator at the Pomona-Inland Valley Council of Churches and Southern California Housing Authority's Hope Through Housing Foundation.

"I always give people the benefit of the doubt and don't instantly question someone's motive," she claimed. "I don't want to lose that, regardless of what I experience."

Bush-Simmons said she finds strength through family - her first one with five generations of kin folks and now with husband Kelvin, a New York Life Insurance agent, their daughter Kandace and her church and community families.

"A lot of young families face isolation because we've lost the traditional extended family," she charged. "When I was growing up, family meant your neighbors, too, not just the people who lived in the house with you. A lot of conditions today have left families themselves. Extended family provides a safety net. Isolation destroys families. "There have to be people who can show young parents and young people how to put the pieces back together when crises come," she suggested. "The challenge is to help people understand we need each other. Societal assertions that we don't need anybody, can do it alone and can pull ourselves up our own boot straps, that's a lie. "We were created and designed to support and help one another," she stressed. "God said it is not good for man to be alone. Eve wasn't an afterthought. She was always in the design."

Re-connecting people - to each other, to services and resources, to families, to the community - is Bush-Simmons' goal. Some might say it's a lofty one. She says it's achievable, one person and family at a time.

She previously served on the Pomona Boys and Girls Club board, co-founded the Consortium for Multicultural Projects with Lawrence Jane Penn of Rancho Cucamonga

and volunteered at unity and diversity conferences for Inland Valley children and teens. A past chairwoman of the Inland Valley Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Celebration Committee, she still volunteers with this group and the Pomona Valley Human Relations Council and serves as Antioch's youth pastor.

Honors have included receiving the YWCA of the West End's Women of Achievement Award, being recognized as an outstanding leader in nonprofits the Business Press and Apartment Professionals magazine naming her as one of the top 14 female executives in the industry. Gayle Claiborne of Pomona has worked with Bush-Simmons on the human relations council, the city of Pomona Advocates for Communication and Trust and the King committee.

"I've known La Quetta for several years and in various capacities. Whenever she's asked to do anything, she always steps up to the plate and many times she goes above and beyond the initial requests of her time and talents," Claiborne said.

"She is a very spiritual woman who has been a leader in this community for some time. Although she has not been given her rightful dues and recognition the community and the different agencies she has served, she has never hesitated to put her best foot forward and help others."

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