

COMMUNITY

Noted Photographer Says Blacks Unfairly Portrayed by Media

▲ White House photographer recently visits Winston-Salem to promote "Songs of my People" exhibit

By VERONICA CLEMONS
Chronicle Staff Writer

You can find out a lot about Sharon Farmer through a conversation. She has a lot to say. But by looking at some of the pictures she has taken during her career as a photographer, a person is sure to learn even more.

In any assignment she has ever had, Farmer said she has looked for African-American subjects.

"If they sent me to do weather, I looked for black people doing something outside," she said.

She said African Americans have not received a fair shake when it comes to media portrayal. The majority of African-American footage coming from television and newspaper photos, she said, shows them in a negative light.

"They (the media) keep treating us like the stepchildren we're not," she said. "We're under counted and not exalted like the people we are. We're not crazy and we still act decent."

Farmer is one of the 50 African-American photographers who traveled across the country to help put together the landmark project "Songs of My People." The project brings together an array of black and white photos taken by African-American photographers designed to tell the story of the African-American experience through the African-American perspective. "Songs of My People" is now on exhibit at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh until July 17.

Farmer said the project allowed black photographers to come together and see if they could do things together. "This project came from 53 different hearts that met as one," she said. All of the photographers were given assignments, but 90 percent of the ones that made the book did not come from those.

Farmer was in Winston-Salem at the Delta Arts Center on June 25 for a community-sharing day sponsored by the Delta Center, the N.C. Museum of Art and the Society for the Study of African-American History.

Deborah Reid-Murphy of the Museum of Art said the museum is working through communities to try to involve more African Americans in the arts and serve as many people in the state as possible.

Farmer is responsible for one of the most memorable photos in the book, 97-year-old Beatrice Ferguson demonstrating her hula-hoop skills.

After being sent to California to shoot things for the project, Farmer found none of them made the book. She was tipped off about Ferguson and called her. Ferguson invited Farmer over to see a video of her riding the bike and doing the hula-hoop. She then did a live demonstration for the camera.

"She proceeded to just go to town," Farmer said. "She's probably the most energetic 97-year-old I have ever seen."

Since she was a young girl, Farmer said she has always been involved with the arts. At Ohio State, she started out as a music major. She played the bassoon. She said she was a writer before she became a photographer.

Farmer currently serves as a White House photographer, traveling with President Clinton and his wife on many of her assignments. She said she feels real good about working for Clinton.

"This guy is my boss and I like it," she said. "They're wonderful people and they recognize that Americans need to be together like no other administration, and I don't see any Republicans talking about harmony."

"The Clintons are like the cousins you know around the block," she added. "I don't think Bill Clinton has seen a hand yet that he won't shake."

Farmer dedicates all of her work to showing that African-American culture is as diverse as any other. Part of the problem with

blacks being misrepresented in the media, she said, is because there is not enough black representatives in the media. According to Farmer, African-Americans comprise 10 percent of the population but 10 percent of media personnel are not black.

force. When added to other minority representation the percentage rises to 10.49 percent. The entire survey concluded there was little growth in minority and total newsroom employment in 1993.

"Prejudice and sexism are still high," she said. "And as a black

Farmer said, is to vote. People must realize the power of the vote and realize how much power Congress really has.

If everyone voted, they (government) couldn't get away with the stuff that they do."

Voting, she said, would take people like Sen. Jesse Helms, R-NC, out of office and put in place candidates who really stand for unity, like Harvey Gantt.

Farmer said she was in South Africa to witness the installation of Nelson Mandela as president in the country's first democratic election. She said she was in awe to see blacks and whites together holding up clinched fists singing the national anthem.

"It blew my mind," she said. "I wouldn't be surprised if South Africa set the example for how blacks and whites can live together. Here, we still have not figured out how to live together."

"If they sent me to do weather, I looked for black people doing something outside."

"There are not 10 percent of us anywhere," she said. The numbers are even smaller when considering upper management personnel, she said. She added that white media executives are not looking as hard as they say they are for qualified journalists.

An employment survey conducted by the National Society of Newspaper Editors showed that 2,890 black journalists, 5.38 percent, represent the newsroom work

woman there are a lot of obstacles."

Because of media coverage, Rodney King did not get a fair trial, she said, and the same will be true of O.J. Simpson, who has been charged with murdering his ex-wife and her friend.

"He's (O.J.) has already been tried by the media," she said. "The media is the most unfair law."

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Sharon Farmer is the official photographer for Hillary Clinton.

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