

'Stand Your Ground' moves author to a new level

BY FELECIA PIGGOTT-LONG, PH. D. FOR THE CHRONICLE

Victoria Christopher Murray, Essence best-selling author of 25 novels, and three-time NAACP Image Award Nominee for Outstanding Fiction, has done it again. Her latest off the press, "Stand Your Ground," rides upon the spirited wind of our times. Murray weaves a timely story about race relations within the American justice system.

She engaged a lively audience of book club enthusiasts, fans from the first 24 novels, and newcomers who packed the book discussion area of the Forsyth County Public Library, Carver School Road Branch on Monday, July 20. Several women in the audience had already read the novel, and came to get it autographed as well as a bag of other favorites, such as "Temptation," "The Ex Files," "Lady Jasmine and The Deal" and "The Dance and the Devil," a book soon to be seen on screen.

Murray has been writing since she was a child in the second grade. She "plagiarized" a "masterpiece" full of all of the characters she loved. There were three pigs in her play, three bears, seven little men, a good witch and a bad witch. Murray's second-grade teacher allowed the

entire second-grade class to participate in a live production of Murray's production.

"She validated the gift that had been given to me. . . And when I was in the seventh grade, I saw a black man's face on the back of a book [Richard Wright], I asked why it was there.

The librarian told me he wrote that book. I could not get my hands on enough literature," she said.

After graduating from Hampton University and earning her MBA in Marketing, she never lost the dream to write. She wrote her first book in 1997: "Temptation." It was about a Christian man who loved his wife, but he yielded to temptation. It was filled with drama like so many of her books. They have been listed under the genre of Christian Fiction.

However, her book "Stand Your Ground" has been listed as a "must read." Murray has come to realize that "This is the most important book I have ever written," she said. "This book will make you want to do something! This book is impactful. It is so

relevant. I wrote it when Micheal Brown and Eric Garner had been killed. I became an Angry Black Woman, and this book helped me work it out."

"This is my most important book because the Stand Your Ground Law affects so many people in so many ways. Not enough of us understand this law," she said. "I wanted to tell a story that is entertaining and educates the public as well."

The storyline revolves around two mothers who are 33 years of age, and each woman has one son. One woman is the mother of a seventeen-year-old African American male, and the other woman is the wife of the wealthy white male who shoots the Black teen. According to Murray, "The shooter is wealthy, and his family is well-known. He does not like thugs, but he loves black boys, as he has sown into many black boys' lives," she said. "Nobody is all good, and nobody is all bad."

Murray has chosen to use the national controversy surrounding the Trayvon Martin case and "Stand Your Ground" gun

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Hair

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chairwoman of the Department of Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan, said on CNN.

Dr. Trudier Harris, the former J. Carlyle Sitterson Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has much to say about negative attitudes that have been extended toward natural hair and locks in the workplace.

"You can easily document negative attitudes toward locks in the workplace" Harris said. "I mention some of those in my essay on hair in Summer Snow [her book "Summer Snow: Reflections from a Black Daughter of the South," published in 2007]. African-American females and males have been required to cut their locks in order to lessen friction in their places of work.

"It is noteworthy, however, that, given the numbers of professional athletes and other highly visible African-Americans who currently have locks, that the climate of tolerance is stronger these days than it has ever been," Harris said.

According to Ayana Harding, the owner of Ayana's Glory Locs in Winston-Salem, the year 2000 marked the explosion of a trend for African-American women toward embracing their natural hair, free from chemical straighteners.

"Going natural is empowering, and it says something about who we are as a people. We are no longer suppressing our hair. We want to show ourselves as people of beauty," Harding said.

"We are showing that there is nothing wrong with natural hair," she said. "Since I started my shop in 2000, there has been an explosion, a revolution. There is something very

positive about it. I know that one day there would be more people with natural hair. What will happen in 15 more years? Who knows?"

Ayana's Glory Locs serves a clientele comprised of 75 percent professional women, such as doctors, professors, dentists, corporate executives and clergywomen. At this shop they can have their hair done in sister locs, g-locs or traditional locs. For Harding, having her hair locked was very liberating.

"When I looked in the mirror at my locs, I felt that the ceiling had been lifted from the shop. I felt like chains were being released from my arms and feet. I wanted every black woman in America to feel what I felt," Harding said.

Minnie Ervin, owner of Ervin's Beauty Services on Patterson Avenue, has been in business since 1976. She has only had one relaxer in her life, and that was in the 1960s. She prefers the bounce and body of natural hair that is straightened with a hot comb rather than with chemicals, and so do many of her customers.

"During my years of service to the community, I have to say that 80 percent of my customers who had perms or relaxers have gone back to natural hair in the last 10 years. Permed hair seems to lay too close to the head, and the chemicals take the elasticity out of the hair and makes the hair too straight," Ervin said.

Recent data from the global research firm Mintel supports the claim that natural hair may be the current norm in African-American haircare. In her article "Natural Hair: It's More Than a Hashtag," Kerisha Harris records the following research. Chemical relaxers "now account for just 21 percent of Black haircare sales, and the sector has declined 26 percent since 2008 and 15 percent since 2011, when sales reached \$179 million, the only category not to see

growth."

The natural hair trend shows an increase the sale of styling products such as moisturizers, curl creams, setting lotions and the like - sales of products to maintain natural styles - but the multicultural analyst at Mintel shows that "expenditures from 2008 to 2013 shows steady growth in the Black haircare category for all categories except relaxers/perms."

Also, more women are making the choice to wear natural styles in the workplace.

Shontell Robinson, human relations director of Forsyth County Government, is an African-American woman who helps interview people for the 2,100 jobs in the county.

"Whether a person's hair is natural or processed does not determine whether that person is professional. Natural or processed hair does not have an impact. I have two staff members with natural hair, and they look very professional. We look for people who can do the job," Robinson said. "Whether they wear braids, curly styles or a bun, they have a professional demeanor, and they perform professionally."

Pam Small, receptionist of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools Human Resources Department, has seen many of the more than 7,800 workers who serve the school system.

"I have never heard that hairstyle has an impact on the hiring practices here. Some women's hair is skin short, or may be worn in a braid. I have never seen a hairstyle have any impact here. People are judged on their job performance," Small said.

Chronicle Managing Editor Donna Rogers contributed to this report.

Coming next week: African-American women in charge speak about natural hair.



Tracey Strickland and her grandmother Mrs. Strickland get author Victoria Christopher Murray to sign their copies of "Stand Your Ground."

laws to start a movement toward repealing this law. When Murray first penned this text, there were only 23 states that had adopted this law. Arkansas has recently become the 26th state under this law. Murray wishes that the earlier states had fought to rid America of this scourge.

"They are quietly adding more states, and we are just being quiet about it. We forget sometimes when the emotions have died down. Nobody is interested in the issue then," Murray said. "I hate that about us as a people! We cannot let it go! We must galvanize a movement state by state. It is harder to galvanize state by state, but we should take a lesson from North Carolina. North Carolina is first up on the Voting Rights and Moral Monday issues. We need to watch what you are doing. I am happy about your effort. You had more than 6,000 marching against these issues."

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