

Bassett shows love does have something to do with it

Oscar nominee wows crowd at BCC fund-raiser

By DAMON FORD
THE CHRONICLE

Ten-year-old Marion Britton could only utter three words when he first laid eyes on Angela Bassett.

"That's Angela Bassett....That's Angela Bassett" was all the fifth-grader said as he stood frozen with wide eyes pointing to the diva, but he wasn't alone.

Many others who were on hand for the Best Choice Center's 10-year celebration program on Saturday night were just as enamored with the Academy Award nominee.

Bassett, who starred in such movies as "What's Love Got To Do With It," "Waiting To Exhale" and "How Stella Got Her Groove Back," was the guest of honor for the night. Bassett didn't disappoint, flashing that winning smile as she took snapshot after snapshot and mingled with the 300 or so guests on the third floor of the Wachovia Linden Building.

While the spotlight shone brightly on the 40-year-old Bassett, it was the Best Choice Children's Choir that stole the hearts of everyone in attendance as they sang two songs: "I Believe I Can Fly" and "Friends."

Being a part of an event to help children is heartwarming, Bassett said.

"There are some sectors of society where (kids are) progressing wonderfully and then other aspects of society are pulling our children into a black hole - an abyss," she said. "And it's programs started in the community by simple folk like Dorothy Graham-Wheeler who are going to save a generation of young men and women."

"It's about nurturing and giving kids opportunities," Graham-Wheeler added. "It's not enough for them to go to school and get an education."

There are 150 children who are part of BCC's program. The funds raised Saturday will mean at least 100 more youngsters will be able to join, giving them the opportunity to travel around the United States.

According to Graham-Wheeler, BCC's staff focuses on giving the children three things: experience, exposure and enhancement.

"If we can put all those together, then children can do anything," she said. "We have kids that have never made the honor roll before who are now doing that."

Bassett is a witness to what a difference support and guidance from adults can make. From the time she was a baby to the age of 4, she and

her sister D'nette lived with their aunt Golden Bassett Wall and grandmother, the late Brownie Bassett, near Winston-Salem State University.

Even after they moved back to the projects of St. Petersburg, Fla., with their mother they would still visit the Twin City during the summers.

Wall served as director of student teaching at WSSU. The young Bassett would divide her time between her aunt's home and office. It left an indelible mark on her, she said.

"Growing up around education and around someone for whom that was a priority - educating today's teachers - I just found it exciting and very encouraging and warm, and it was just something that was sort of instilled in me," she said.

Wall, who retired in 1985, says she always tried to keep her nieces busy. She wouldn't let them just sit around and do nothing.

If it was just a trip to the library, Wall kept their minds motivated and their bodies on the go.

Even today Bassett finds it difficult to break that go-go mentality.

"Sometimes I think I'm too busy, you know? I hardly ever want to say no, especially when it's something that's important and especially



Angela Bassett greeted members of the Best Choice Center Children's Choir during their rendition of the song "Friends."

Photo by Damon Ford

if it has something to do with today's youth because I know there were teachers and extended family who were very encouraging of me and my sisters as we were growing up," she said. "I think that helped shape me."

The 66-year-old Wall was one of those driving forces behind Bassett's life, though she didn't quite plan on seeing her on the big screen.

"I really didn't see it," Wall said. "When she went to Yale, she was going to be a pediatrician."

Bassett grabbed hold of the idea as a child and was looking to study in that area, but she realized medicine was not her cup of tea. Instead, Bassett declared a theater major. She had been involved in plays since high school and continued to foster this interest at the Ivy League school.

Wall was a little disappointed with Bassett's choice but as she had done many times before she pledged her support to her niece.

"It was really just an urging in

my spirit and my heart," Bassett said. "Maybe I was just wise at that time. I had no passion for science, and I thought that has got to be difficult, proceeding down a road which you have no passion for."

Because she was raised to be practical, Bassett also decided to double-major in business, just in case things didn't work out.

According to Bassett the most difficult part of pursuing her dream was not having anybody to look up to. No family member ever chose her career path and she knew of no women like herself or her mother or aunt to depend on for advice.

Not to mention there were only a handful of black actresses on television and the movie screen, like Ruby Dee and Della Reese, for her to emulate.

Bassett's favorite actress was Cicely Tyson from whom she has drawn strength over the years.

Now in the 1990s with several hit movie roles to her credit and a number of awards in hand, she stands as one of a few black actresses young girls look up to today.

"(Tyson) was an incredible talent," Bassett said. "What she was to me now I represent and it just gives them hope that this is possible."

"I followed my dreams; it's as simple as that."

Policing the police: Cochran vows to defend defenseless

By JERI YOUNG
THE CHRONICLE

An ethical lawyer is not an oxymoron, says one of the nation's top attorneys.

Legal eagle Johnnie Cochran talked religion, ethics and the law during a lecture at Winston-Salem State University last Thursday.

"Let me set the record straight right here in beginning," he said. "One can in fact be a Christian and practice law."

The lecture was part of the university's James A. Gray Lecture Series. Over the past year, a host of well known theologians have visited the university to discuss religion and ethics in the 21st century. Cochran's speech marked the end of the series, which included lectures by former First Baptist

Church pastor the Rev. William S. Epps.

Epps now pastors Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles, where Cochran is a member.

During his 45-minute speech, Cochran paid homage to the lecture series. He also drew chuckles from the crowd of more than 1,100 with his reminiscences of a life spent balancing the black Baptist church and the law.



Cochran

"On Oct. 2, 1937, in Shreveport's Charity Hospital, my mother - Hattie B. Cochran - delivered me into a world where your food was always friend and everyone you knew was black and Baptist," Cochran quoted from his New York Times best seller "Journey to Justice."

After drawing a "text" from Bible, Cochran meandered through a host of topics - from his current caseload, which includes the explosive case of Amadou Diallo, the unarmed New York man shot to death by police officers, to his most sensational case so far - the O.J. Simpson murder trial. For more than a year, the nation watched as Cochran put together the defense that eventually led to the acquittal of the National Football League Hall of Fame running

back accused of murdering his wife, Nicole, and waiter Ronald Goldman.

However, Simpson was later found liable for their deaths in a civil trial and was ordered to pay \$33.5 million in damages.

The Simpson case plunged Winston-Salem into the national spotlight. At the height of the trial, Cochran visited the city to retrieve the now infamous tapes of Los Angeles Detective Mark Fuhrman using racial epithets.

"Four years ago, I came to your fair community in pursuit of justice," he said. "It was a little bit delayed on that particular day that I appeared in court here, but ultimately, your court of appeals did the right thing. I have fond memories of that particular time."

Cochran defined ethics as a

"system of moral principals or values relating to human conduct and behavior - a guiding sense, if you will, of right and wrong."

Cochran said it's his sense of ethics that drives him to take on unpopular cases.

"One of the greatest misfortunes that can befall a human being is to be arrested and charged with a crime," he said. "During his arrest or her arrest...many people will judge him or her guilty and therefore unworthy of their respect. The arrestee may endure the stares of passers-by who shake their heads in disgust. Being incarcerated and given a number...Driven by mere accusations, the government, through the machinery of criminal prosecution, will focus its political power against this individual."

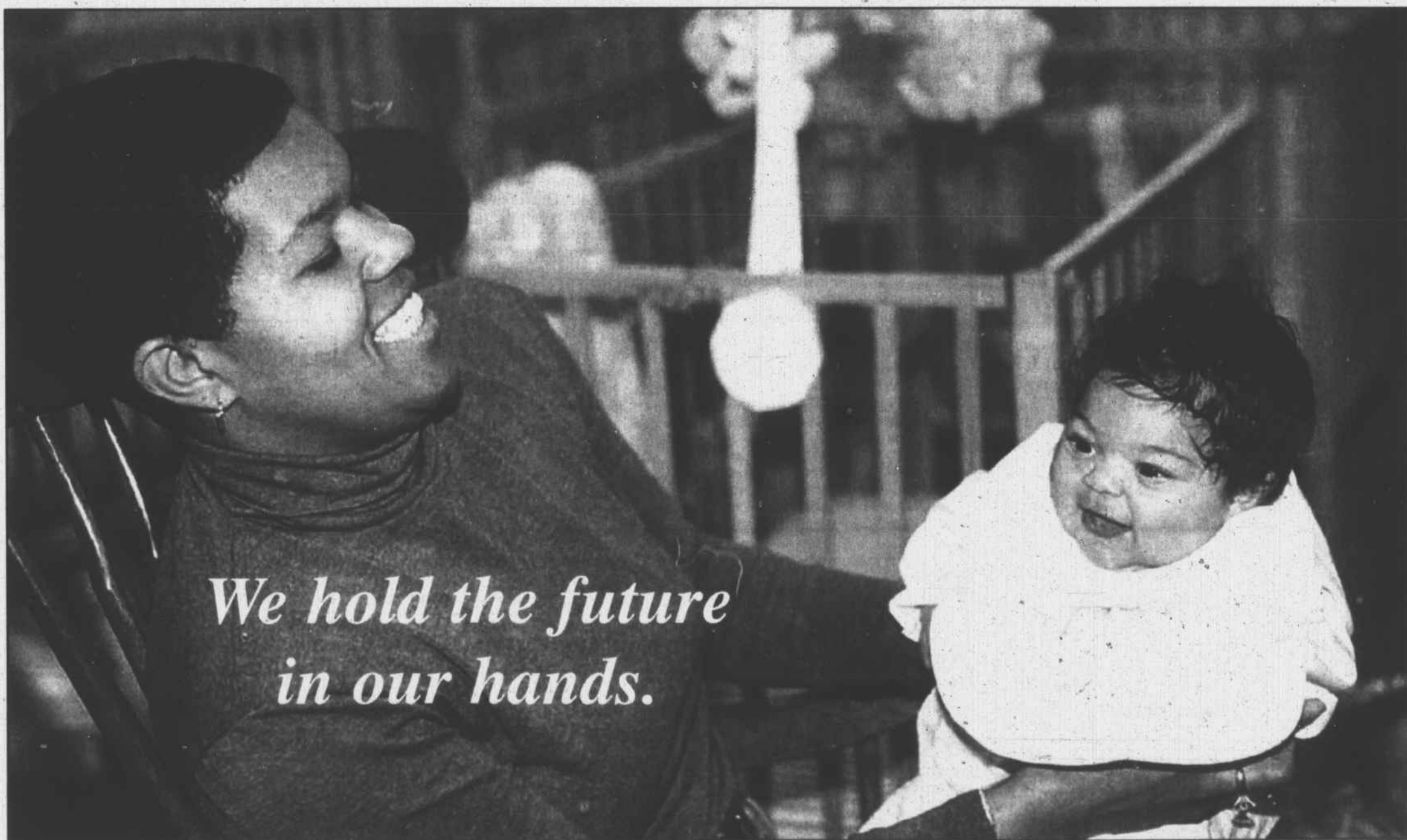
Into this epic battle, Cochran said, enters the defense attorney.

"Nothing shall come between the defense council and his unwavering commitment to his client," he said. "...You would think society that created such a system would revere those who defend the rights of the accused. But this not always so."

Cochran said often criminal defense attorneys have to defend their own reputations as well as their client's.

"No matter how skilled or talented, honest or ethical, the often asked question is how can you defend those people," he said. "It's now asked by more and more people with less tolerance and with greater contempt...It makes the criminal attorney's job that much

See Cochran on A10



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