

Her Destiny: Upbeat News

By Jan Paschal

Shortly after the September 11 attacks, **Timberly Whitfield** received a call that changed her life. “My parents were visiting,” she said. “We were in a religious bookstore. I got this call from my agent saying, ‘There’s this show from the Hallmark Channel, a spiritual show’” and that the search was on for a host. That was in October 2001, when New York was still reeling from the attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center and killed thousands of people.

“Everyone was telling me these stories,” she said. “Attendance at church was up at the time our show was born. We wanted to show the country there’s good out there.” The story of how Whitfield—in her fifth year as host of “New Morning”—landed the cable TV job sounds like a segment on her hour-long weekday show, in which guests have included Tissa Hami, a young Muslim woman who’s a stand-up comic.

“This is the opposite of ‘If it bleeds, it leads’ journalism,” said Whitfield, who started her New York career as a local TV reporter. “I quickly realized it wasn’t what I wanted to do. It didn’t feed my soul.”

She had spent seven years as a writer, producer and programming executive at A&E Television Networks in New York. “I went from being a girl to a woman (at A&E TV),” she said. During that time, she met Lt. Robert Allen, a New York City police detective.

They married in 1997. In December 1998, she left A&E in search of on-camera work.

“Nobody was beating down my door,” she said. “With my husband’s encouragement, I kept at it. I was sitting under the dryer at the beauty salon, when my stylist handed me this little book, *The Game of Life and How to Play It* by Florence Scovel Shinn. Her message: How you think affects Your life. Your words are your power.”

Soon she was back in L.A., talking with E! Entertainment Television and “Access Hollywood.” During those meetings, she found her agent, who told her about Hallmark. Ed Murray, president and CEO of Faith & Values Media, the nonprofit corporation that produces “New Morning” for the Hallmark Channel, recalled their first meeting. “In the middle of the interview, we find out she’s a preacher’s kid who grew up in Africa,” he said. “And I thought: ‘Keep talking, dear.’ I have no idea what her religious practice is. But she’s very comfortable with it.”

Whitfield was born in Kansas City, Mo. She was 5 or 6 when her parents, both Methodist missionaries, moved to Tanzania in eastern Africa with her and her younger brother. Later, they served in Nigeria. They didn’t own a television set. The irony is not lost on her or Murray.

“What makes her stand out is she has a presence with tremendous staying power,” Murray said. “She’s comfortable with people on the air, whether they’re



Photo by Stan Schmier

Timberly Whitfield

a Catholic priest, a former nun or a Buddhist. We want to find out where they’re coming from without getting into doctrinal things.”

Whitfield makes this look easy. She majored in religion and communications at Clark College in Atlanta. “I never put religion on my resume,” she said, remembering the reaction when it came out during her Hallmark interview. “Their mouths were hanging open like ‘Wow.’ It was like a match made in heaven.”

The show premiered in June 2002. It was recently renewed for a sixth season. Its audience includes women ages 35 to 55, but men watch, too.

“I call us ‘the little show that could,’” she said. Each program uses a theme such as hospitality, gratitude, or even conquering clutter. She’s not afraid to show guests and viewers that she faces the same problems they do.

She asked Beth Johnson, the clutter coach, how to persuade her daughter, Raina, 4, to give away some toys and clear a path in her room.

“We get e-mails from people who say they love waking up in the morning to a show that offers them something other than violence and war,” Whitfield said. Before going on the air, she reads as much as she can about her guests. “I had Robert Thurman, the Tibetan scholar and (the actress) Uma’s dad, and we had a ball. I brought him down to a level where we connected,” she said.

Fred Friendly, her J-School ethics professor, made a cameo appearance, posthumously. On Oct. 30, his birthday, the show ran Friendly’s photo and a favorite quote. “I loved him,” she said, laughing about how she sat up front in class, and he called her “Senator Whitfield.” Some traits that must have impressed Friendly caught the attention of Brooke Bailey Johnson, her A&E mentor. Now president of the Food Network, Johnson was A&E’s senior vice president of programming when Whitfield was there.

“She has a lot of the traditional journalism qualities,” Johnson said. “She’s curious and tenacious, but in a nice way, with a broad world view. Her parents came to visit the channel, and they were wearing African robes. That was exotic.”

Then there’s her name, Timberly, which her mother chose, because “she liked Kimberly but wanted something different.” Google that name and there’s only one.