

TIMBERLY WHITFIELD

defying boundaries

BY MELISSA CHAPMAN-MUSHNICK

While her name may not be in the echelon of popular celebrities just yet, Timberly Whitfield, a luminous television personality and an aspiring actress, is a woman on the verge of stardom. As the host of the critically acclaimed television newsmagazine *New Morning*, broadcast each weekday on the Hallmark Channel, Whitfield is clearly a woman who exudes confidence, yet displays a deep sense of humility during each interview she conducts. She easily gains the trust of her guests, and ultimately her viewers, by giving them a relaxed platform in which to share their inspirational, life-altering experiences.

Yet her role as talk show host is merely one of several objectives she's in the midst of tackling. Bent on tearing down stereotypical barriers, her rich wealth of life experiences has enabled her to grow into the self-possessed, stunning African-American woman she is today.

Her mother and father hailed from Arkansas. Bill and Jimmie Whitfield, lay missionaries affiliated with the United Methodist Church, had always dreamed of living in Africa. They moved the family to Tanzania when Whitfield (who was born in Kansas City, Missouri) was 6.

"I think my parents went over there with an idealized vision of what their lives would be like when they got there," says Whitfield. "Instead they were called *wazungu*—Swahili for "white ones" or "white people"—because we looked and dressed differ-



Photo courtesy of Timberly Whitfield

ently and we were essentially outsiders. It was a rude awakening for my parents and quite tough for them to deal with, since it wasn't the reaction and homecoming that they had anticipated."

Whitfield's dad, who has a master's degree in agricultural economics from the University of Arkansas, developed programs to aid the local villagers in the optimum utilization of their land. Her mother, a U of A graduate with a master's degree in art education, worked with the women and children in the village to help them learn how to balance their families' meals and how to read and write.

A precocious child, Whitfield realized her life in Tanzania was incredibly different from what it had been in the United States. The simple act of bathing required a half-mile walk to the spring to fetch pitchers of water, Whitfield recalls, smiling. "Oftentimes, we had no electricity, so I grew up reading by lantern and candlelight. We also had to gather small branches of wood that we'd use to start a fire for our cooking needs and also to filter our water supply." She and her brother, Azande, quickly became fluent in Swahili.

In first grade, she attended a very proper British school in East Africa. Each morning, she walked a mile on a dirt road, carrying her books and lunch, until she reached the main road, where she would catch the local village bus into the town of Arusha. Whitfield vividly recalls how the bus overflowed with people and their wares—including live chickens.

"I think back to what I did as a child and wonder how I was able to do that

every day so easily, with no fear. Living the way I did I'm sure helped bolster my character and my independence. Even now, as an adult, I realize that I can make do with very little, and I guess that outlook on life came out of the way I lived and how I was brought up."

Despite the perceived hardships of growing up in an environment devoid of modern conveniences, Whitfield flourished in her family's remote village. When she was a teenager, Whitfield's family moved to Bambar, Nigeria, and she and her brother

attended a boarding school in Jos. The student body comprised kids from all over the world, many of whose parents were ambassadors or government officials. "Even while I was living in Jos I knew it was an incredible experience. For me, it was a true example of living in the moment," says Whitfield, with a gleam in her eye as she mentally transports herself back to that sacred and defining part of her youth.

When it came to higher education, Whitfield chose to go to Atlanta, Georgia, where she enrolled as an undergraduate at Clark Atlanta University, a college with a predominantly African-American heritage. She credits her decision as a testament to her mom. Wherever they lived geographically, her mother always educated Whitfield about her rich history and culture as a person of African-American descent; about those who came before her and upon whose backs she was enabled to stand and achieve professional success.

In Atlanta, Whitfield earned a B.A. in communications and religion. However, always having considered herself more of a spiritual person than a religious one, she pursued a career in journalism. Graduating from Columbia University's School of Journalism with a master's degree, she landed a job as an on-air reporter in local broadcasting in New York City.

"But being a hard-news journalist didn't sit right with my soul," says Whitfield, who decided to leave



Photo courtesy of Timberly Whitfield

journalism behind for a career working behind the scenes at A&E Television Networks. "I grew up at A&E. I went from being a girl to a woman there," she says. And although she enjoyed seven years of creative freedom and challenges—and was even given the opportunity to interview big-name celebrities in front of the camera on *Breakfast with the Arts*—Whitfield felt it was time to move on and pursue her real passion: hosting a television show.

"I think my ability to jump in and do what I feel passionate about has a lot to do with my upbringing, and the fact that my parents instilled a real sense of independence in me. I have the coolest parents. They were, and continue to be, the greatest role models. They never determined my or my brother's worth by the grades we got or the careers we chose. They were always more about making sure that we nurtured our spirit."

"After reading that book, I started to feel and think more positively, and that's when I started getting phone



Photo courtesy of Timberly Whitfield

The Allen family.

expanded from a half hour to an hour, has been picked up for its sixth season. By the end of 2006, Whitfield had completed 431 episodes and interviewed over 240 guests. It now also airs weekly in Israel on KARMA Channel 39.

Whitfield says that because *New Morning* premiered just nine months after 9/11, the program had a built-in audience waiting for it, "viewers who were looking to be engaged in stories that would inspire them to re-examine their lives. I love hosting *New Morning* because I feel that the values my parents instilled in me are at the heart of the show."

As the host of *New Morning*, Whitfield's goal is to remind people that life is a journey and how important it is to savor every moment. "People tell me so many stories of survival and perseverance," she says. "These stories really give me perspective when I get up in the morning. And I know it does the same for our viewers.

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While there was a period when Whitfield began to second-guess her decision to leave a high-profile position, it was then that she was serendipitously given a little book that she credits with bringing her back-to-the-present moment and catapulting her to the next phase of her career. The book, *The Game of Life and How to Play It*, first published in 1925 by a Christian woman named Florence Scovel-Shinn, is all about the power of positive thinking.

"Anytime you say, 'This is hard, I can't do it,' it's as if you're putting blocks in your way," says Whitfield.

calls and meetings. I was back on my game; I was in it."

In October of 2001, Whitfield got the call that that changed her life. She auditioned to host *New Morning*, a magazine-style TV program produced by Faith & Values Media, the nation's largest coalition of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faith groups and individuals dedicated to media production, distribution, and promotion. Three months later she got the job; six months after that Whitfield went on the air, and, to this day, remains the on-air host.

The show, which recently

all of us are really from the same spirit. On a daily basis, we encourage people to start their day in an uplifting way, instead of waking up to the hard news of the day. From the positive feedback we receive via viewer e-mails, it's clear that this little show is having a huge impact on our world."

And while she is comfortably ensconced in her role as the host of *New Morning*, Whitfield is also pursuing a career as an actress and would love to work on a sitcom or drama. In fact, she and her husband, Robert Allen, a former NYPD lieutenant, are both pursuing their

acting aspirations. And they are equally hard at work writing film and television scripts.

"We're trying to get into the writing and producing game so that we can create our own projects instead of waiting for good material to come our way. And we have actually written a treatment that is loosely based on our lives as an interracial, interfaith couple," says Whitfield.

On top of her professional ambitions, she is also the mother of a biracial daughter, Raina, whom she and her husband are raising in the Jewish faith. When she and her husband first met,

and my daughter, who attends Kinneret, a Jewish day school in Riverdale, is learning to speak Hebrew."

As for the future, Whitfield has lofty goals. And with her dynamic spirit and resilience, she's likely to



On the set of *New Morning*.

Photo courtesy of Timberly Whitfield

actress, writer, and producer. I'd love to eventually learn the Hebrew language and, of course, stay connected to Judaism, Israel, and my family there.

"My big dream is to start a program around the country where high school students go abroad. I really believe that American kids need to experience what it means to live in situations where basic needs like food and shelter are hard to come by, and where they'll get the chance to learn about different cultures. Maybe students can use it as an opportunity to give back and take a break from our extremely materialistic society, and spend some

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their different religions and races were never an issue for either of them. Her parents, who are extremely open-minded and spiritual, welcomed her husband, and his seven siblings warmly embraced Whitfield into their family.

"Judaism and Christianity share the Old Testament, so what's most important to me is that my daughter has a basis in faith. It's kind of interesting how, as a teenager, my parents took me to Israel, because in their belief it is a place that is a cornerstone for all religions," says Whitfield. "And now I'm married to a man who has a lot of family in Israel,



A *New Morning* interview.

Photo courtesy of Timberly Whitfield

quality time in a developing country like Africa or India."

In this spirit, Whitfield recently emceed the Third Annual Sharing the Light Gala, a fundraiser sponsored by the MacDella Cooper Foundation, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to aid the survivors of Liberia's brutal, 14-year civil war. Because of her connection to Africa, the cause held special meaning for Whitfield.

"I see my work and everything that I've done," she says, "as a springboard toward other things. Life is a journey and I'm still in the midst of it." lifestyles

attain the goals she's set for herself and, in true Timberly Whitfield form, probably generate a brand-new set of equally challenging ambitions.

"There's so much I want to do and accomplish in my lifetime," says Whitfield. "I'd like to be a successful