

“Black Men in America”
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Interview with Cathy Harris



**MS. CATHY HARRIS: A WOMAN IN THE
BUSINESS OF EMPOWERING AND
UPLIFTING HER COMMUNITY**

BMIA: Creativity, unbridled talent, ingenuity and profound thought is in abundance in the African American community and are a mere sampling of the gifts that the African American community brings to the Table of Humanity. Ms. Cathy Harris is an individual whose creativity, unbridled talent, ingenuity, strong sense of justice and profound thought is helping others to transcend boundaries and create options. She is a woman who is in the business of uplifting and empowering her community. Harris is an author, lecturer, consultant and a mother who came to my attention on an evening in April 2006. I was working late in my office and listening to WURD 900 AM, a radio talk show station in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania which is taking “community radio” to a whole new level, when I heard Ms. Harris’ dynamic voice. Her message was so compelling that I stopped working on my project. Instead, I listened intently to what she had to say and began taking notes. And after hearing what she had to say, I decided that Ms. Cathy Harris was a person that as many people as possible needed to know about.

BMIA: So, who is Cathy Harris? Who were her role models? Where was she born?

CH: "I came from humble beginnings. I was raised in rural Georgia – Bowdon, Georgia – the middle child of nine siblings. My role models were my mother, Maya Angelou, Harriet Tubman and other women whom I thought were absolutely great. My mom told me that as I go out into the world to treat everyone right -- treat others like you want to be treated. Respect others especially your elders," Ms. Harris stated.

BMIA: Mindful of the fact that Ms. Harris is a community organizer, entrepreneur, author, publisher, lecturer, consultant and mother, I wanted to know how she was able to maintain balance in her life in view of the fact that she had become "all things to all people" outside of her family circle. Ms. Harris offered the following:

CH: "I count my blessings everyday. I know I have been fortunate. Despite the pain I have felt in my life, I have learned to also count my victories. I raised two daughters by myself from the ages of four and five who are now graduate students. I told myself a long time ago that I was going to be happy no matter what. I retired from my federal government job in 2005 after going through ten years of workplace abuse. After spending fifteen months out of work on unpaid stress leave, I was in a bad place. I often wonder, 'Why did I get better?' So many women who had gone through workplace abuse never got better. I asked myself 'Why Me?' I realized after returning to work that I had a true purpose in life and that I would uphold my purpose to educate, inform and empower others to take control of their own lives."

BMIA: For twenty-seven years, the federal government employed Ms. Harris. During the course of her employment, she was moved by certain circumstances to become a "whistleblower" to form the Customs Employees Against Discrimination Association ("CEADA"). Why did Harris become a "whistleblower"? Why did she create CEADA?

CH: "After witnessing first-hand for many years unethical practices against international travelers, I knew it would be me that would have to come forward. I had spoken to several co-workers all over the United States, who too, confirmed that the racial profiling was taking place at their port -- but I knew since I lived in the hometown of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that it would be me who would have to come forward. I knew I had to blow the whistle on the United States Customs Service. And to blow the whistle - I took three steps. One: I formed Customs Employees Against Discrimination Association (www.ceada.com) because being a part of an organization is powerful. Two: I went to the National Newspapers Publishers Association -- the NNPA -- (www.nnpa.org) and asked then-President Dorothy Leavell who was also the founder of the Chicago Crusader to give my organization a reporter who could help us expose the United States Customs Service. She gave us Professor Linn Washington from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who put out stories every two weeks for six months on the abuses of Black women international travelers committed by Customs employees. Linn also reported on the internal abuses in the agency. Three: I went to a media attorney. The attorney took my story to a local investigative news team -- Fox 5 in Atlanta, Georgia -- which later won the "Peabody Award" for my story "Singled Out by U.S. Customs."

BMIA: So who or what inspires Ms. Harris? How is she able to "step out on faith"?

CH: "I am inspired by other activists and advocates who have done much more than me. They have stood on the front lines and spoke for those who had no voice. It's also my calling to do the same. So many people have lost their way because of the current administration, the outsourcing of jobs and the downsizing of corporations," Harris remarked.

BMIA: The discussion moved to the number of books Ms. Harris has authored which include, Flying While Black; a ten-part book series entitled, How To Take Control Of Your Life; The Failure of Homeland In-Security; The Cathy Harris Story; and Discrimination 101. What motivated Harris to write these books?

CH: The only books in print at this time are "Flying While Black" and "How To Take Control of Your Own Life." The other three books will come out soon. I wrote all the books because the stories had to be told so others could learn from my struggles. "How To Take Control Of Your Own Life" is available at www.HowToTakeControl.com. My other books are available on www.angelspress.com or on www.amazon.com," explained Ms. Harris.

BMIA: Cathy Harris is fearless. She has no qualms about "walking through fire" or daring to "go where Angels fear to tread." And she has a very low threshold for injustice. What makes Cathy Harris fearless? What makes Cathy Harris not have any trepidation about "walking through fire" or daring to "go where Angels"?

CH: "Leaving home and joining the military was my first introduction to injustice. I learned at an early age that there was a lot of wickedness in the world. I witnessed first-hand several acts of racism against minority soldiers and sexual harassment and sexism against women. Being a mom of two daughters, it made me very uncomfortable. I thought of my daughters being in these predicaments and not knowing what to do. From the very beginning, my conscience told me that eventually I would have to make a stand against injustice. I had no idea that a country girl from rural Georgia would one day stand up against the government and make them make many changes."

BMIA: So, why did Harris decide to empower others by sharing her experiences, skills and knowledge?

CH: "How will our kids know that they must step up to the plate if they don't know the stories of their ancestors? Young people who know about their history will go further in life. Our kids must know that we stood up and they must too. Too many people are taking their stories to the graves and no one will ever know their legacy. I was determined to leave something behind not just for my family but for others faced with some type of atrocity in their lives."

BMA: And what is Ms. Harris' key message?

CH: "My key message is that everyone must be in the business of taking care of people. We must be committed to uplifting and empowering the community. Sometimes in life we will come to a crossroad. The real test is: "Which road will we take?"

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