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"The mediocre teacher tells.
The good teacher explains.
The superior teacher demonstrates.
The great teacher inspires."

— William Arthur Ward



Tammy Williams

Living Her *Destiny*

By LAKEISHA FLEMING

PHOTOS BY MARIE THOMAS

She is the first black female to own a television/film studio and post-production facility in Georgia. She creates original content for television and film. Her clientele ranges from major networks to special events, pastors to politicians. Tammy Williams is the CEO of Open Rivers Pictures and founder of Open Rivers Film Academy, based in Fayetteville. Her many achievements are impressive. Yet she is most fulfilled when she is teaching, training and inspiring others to achieve their dreams.

Climbing trees and milking cows are among Tammy's earliest memories. Born in Murfreesboro, Tenn., she grew up in the small community of Little Hope. She recalls carefree times during childhood, filled with visits to the farm her grandparents worked on nearby. Tammy, her brother, and her mom had a stable, secure, middle-class life, but everything changed after one terrifying night.

"My mother got up and she told us later that she kept hearing this popping," Tammy recalls. "She opened up the heater, and it was just a blaze." That fire engulfed their home. At the age of just 10 years old, Tammy watched her family lose almost everything. They relied upon the kindness of family and friends, government assistance, and public housing to survive. In spite of the difficulties



In 2015, Tammy was an integral part of planning the Chick-fil-A Foundation 2015 Winter Gala at Pinewood Atlanta Studios, working alongside of Sally Herman and Cyndi Plunkett, co-presidents of C&S Film Concierge.

the family endured, Tammy gained strength by watching her mother.

"I saw my mom working full time in a factory. I saw her going to beauty school on the weekends to get her cosmetology license, and at the same time take a business class," Tammy recalls. Her mother persevered, eventually running her own business as a hair stylist.

"My mom was and still is the inspiration that really pushes me," Tammy notes. "She's that entrepreneur that I saw growing up." Tammy's grandparents were also

entrepreneurs, having managed a store years earlier. The seeds of owning a business were sown early in Tammy's life.

Tammy's interest in television production was also piqued at a young age. She recalls watching movie premieres on television as a young girl. Tammy was fascinated by what happened behind the camera. "The thought of being in the television business was always in the back of my mind, but when people would ask me about my choice of study, I would say teaching," she recalls. "My friend's sister told me that teaching was a 'safe and



Tammy with her mother, Mary Johnson.



Tammy as a child.



Tammy and husband Alvin., Head of Development and Operations, Open Rivers Pictures.



Tammy with her mother and her brother. "We were living in the home that burned down during the time of this picture," she says.



secure' job, so I should do that."

Her high school and college years brought involvement with the NAACP. Tammy served on the Youth Council, and ultimately, the National Board of Directors. In 1986 she helped lead a high-profile march in her hometown to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., marching past three hooded members of the Klu Klux Klan. "It was a very defining moment for me," she comments. "It showed me that racism was something that was very, very real. But it also showed me the courage that I had in the midst of that."

In fact, Tammy made a courageous decision while attending Middle Tennessee State University. Her major was early childhood education. While she pursued her degree, she worked at La Petite Daycare, becoming the lead teacher. During this time, she came to a powerful realization. "I was working there for a long while, and I decided that being in the classroom for five days a week wasn't my personality," she recalls. "I loved teaching, but the classroom setting wasn't necessarily the best for me at that time." In her junior year, Tammy changed her major to radio/television production.

She sought avenues to learn about production, and took on several internships. In 1987, she started at WSMV-TV in Nashville. There, Tammy made a demo reel. Sitting at the anchor desk was fun, but Tammy wanted to work behind the scenes. Her next position a year later at WTVF-TV in Nashville allowed her to write and edit. The station offered Tammy a part-time job as an editor. After her college graduation with a Bachelor of Science degree in Mass Communications in 1988, she worked at WTVF for several months. Then Tammy felt compelled to do more.

In 1989, she headed to WRCB-TV in Chattanooga, where she worked in the promotions marketing department, which she enjoyed. It catapulted her to a bigger market, WDSU-TV in New Orleans, in 1990. "It afforded me the opportunity to write; I got into producing long-form programming," she notes.



A masterpiece in progress: Tammy collaborates with Sally Z. Herman of C&S Concierge on the Expo held in January of this year.

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Tammy developed a children's show, "My Destiny Place," that teaches entrepreneurship, leadership and character development.

The time in New Orleans also afforded her another opportunity — to delve more deeply into her faith in God. In 1992, she took a position with Greater St. Stephens Church and the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, where she worked to enhance the quality of their television broadcasts, hired crew, and handled production, among other duties. But it wasn't just about the job. "For me, it was more of a spiritual experience, learning about God, learning about me," Tammy states.

After a few years, she felt it was time for a change, and moved to Atlanta in 1998. Although she started out as a freelancer, she found she wasn't prepared to strike out on her own. By the following year, Tammy took a position at World Changers Church International, where she worked in their television department, eventually becoming the lead producer. She soon felt the entrepreneurial itch again. But after her unsuccessful attempt at freelancing, Tammy had reservations.

"I was holding on to getting that paycheck, a constant paycheck, every two weeks, versus stepping back out as a freelancer," she notes. Suddenly, it all made sense. "One day I had a moment where I just felt like God was telling me that, if you don't leave now you're never going to leave." Feeling the need to expand into uncharted waters, Tammy made another leap of faith. She founded Open Rivers Pictures in 2003.

This time, Tammy was prepared. She'd learned valuable lessons from her initial freelance launch, and had a plan. She also had clients and equipment. And soon after launching, she had help — in the form of her now-husband, Alvin Williams, currently Vice-President of Operations and Development at Open Rivers.

Alvin and Tammy are both from Tennessee, and both lived in Atlanta in 2004. However,





In 2014, Tammy visited the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Tammy interviews Motown's Berry Gordy (Kenneth Gamble and Leon A. Huff), Rock n' Roll Hall of Famers for a bio she was producing on them. "I produce and direct a lot of biography pieces on people who have impacted our country through all types of mediums — music, television, business, and so forth," she notes.



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Tammy and her husband, Alvin Williams (center), Head of Development and Operations, Open Rivers Pictures, speak with Rodney D. Bullard, Vice President of Community Affairs and Executive Director of Chick-fil-A Foundation, at the 2015 Chick-fil-a Winter Gala.

it took them both travelling to Phoenix, Ariz., on business to meet. Alvin was a judge on the television show "Gospel Dreams." Tammy was a producer. The two worked together and struck up a professional relationship that turned personal, then blossomed into love. They were married in 2006, and Alvin was along for the ride of Tammy's new venture.

"Open Rivers is like a resource," Tammy explains. "We produce content to educate, uplift and inspire." Tammy was able to work out of her home in the early days of the company. Eventually it grew, and Tammy acquired a studio on Robinson Drive in Fayetteville in 2012. During this time, her client roster grew exponentially. She worked with both the Trumpet Awards and Stellar Gospel Music Awards for several years. She developed original content, including a docu-series television program. She produced and directed a live action segment for "Sesame Street." She developed a children's show, "My Destiny Place," that teaches

entrepreneurship, leadership and character development. Her work aired on networks such as TV One, BET and GMC (now UP TV).

Meanwhile, the landscape of television and film in Georgia was changing. New studios, including Pinewood Atlanta Studios in Fayetteville, were setting up shop. More production work was coming, but personnel weren't trained to handle the workload. Tammy felt a stirring once again, this time as a teacher. She saw the perfect opportunity to marry her two loves of education and production. Open Rivers Film Academy was born in 2012. "Our programs are really very accelerated because we give a really good real world experience. It's very practical and hands on," Tammy says.

In 2014, another opportunity came: Pinewood Atlanta Studios knocked, and Open Rivers answered. The company relocated to their present home, across from the sound stages of Pinewood Studios. Tammy now has a greater platform from which to present her academy classes.

Open Rivers Academy's class offerings include Set Production Assistant and Office Production Assistant workshops, as well as a Webseries Makers workshop. There are also plans to expand with additional film classes, and workshops focusing on writing, hair, and even animal acting.

"She's an educator by heart," says Alvin. "She's always in teaching mode. If there's anybody trying to get into the business, she has a willingness to teach."

In fact, Tammy developed an intern program that has produced mentees. Production assistant Vincent Lott II is one of Tammy's mentees.

"I gained a wealth of industry knowledge just working with her, seeing how she moved," Vincent says. "Even though it's a film production company, it's almost like the atmosphere of a classroom."

The hands-on production experience helped propel Vincent's career. But for him, the Open Rivers experience meant far more for his life. "She will introduce you to yourself," Vincent says of Tammy. "She just gives you another perspective on yourself and your skills. I definitely saw growth within myself from meeting her."

Alvin echoes Vincent's feelings. "Tammy asks each mentee what



Tammy and animal actor, Titus.



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they want to do and what's their goal, and she creates a pathway to their dreams for them. Eventually one day they'll be the next George Lucas, Spike Lee, Steven Spielberg, or even the next Tammy Williams." Several of Tammy's mentees and workshop students have gone on to work on such films as "Captain America 3," "Mother's Day," "Sully," national commercials, and a slew of independent projects.

Even with her full schedule and focus on the film academy, the projects continue. In 2015, Tammy was an integral part of planning the Chick-fil-A Foundation 2015 Winter Gala at Pinewood Atlanta Studios. Sally Herman and Cyndi Plunkett, co-presidents of C&S Film Concierge, were given only three weeks to plan the gala. The event included a live production set, or a "hot set." Tammy's expertise proved invaluable. "Tammy was able to put together the schedule; she produced and wrote the script for the hot set as well as consulted on the set design," Sally says, adding, "She just is such a motivator and she has such a wonderful heart – she sees the best in everybody. And I didn't see any sweat!"

In January 2016, the film academy presented the Cinema South Motion Picture Career & Education Expo. People in all stages of life, from high school students to those changing careers, were able to explore careers in film. "It's where education meets opportunity," Tammy notes.

Tammy's latest project is a five-year labor of love, a documentary titled "Free to Dance." The 90-minute film delves into the life and history of Bishop Paul Morton and the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, and it is scheduled to be released this month. Her previous time working with the organization proved beneficial to the piece, which she says is uplifting. "It's about change," she says. "It's about when you have a vision, going for it no matter what. Not giving up." It sounds applicable to her own life, her mission, and her future with Open Rivers. That future looks bright.

"I just see her riding the wave and definitely being very integral in providing the training necessary for the people in our community to join in on this amazing opportunity that's here in Fayette County," Sally says.

"I think she has a heart for an individual to grow to reach their dreams, to reach their aspirations," Alvin notes. "She'll take her time out, even if it's in or outside the industry ... to give them direction. I think it's just part of her DNA.

"She's the true definition of each one, teach one."



LaKeisha Fleming is the founder and president of Vision 2:2 Productions, LLC, a multimedia production company creating content for television, film and the internet. She is also a prolific writer, and her company provides magazine article, blog, script and press release writing services, among others. She's a loving wife and a proud homeschooling mother. Follow her blog at www.andthatsmyreality.com.

