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San Lorenzo author touches on her family heritage, roots

Writer draws inner strength from her great-grandfather's extraordinary legacy

By Rachel Cohen, STAFF WRITER

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SAN LORENZO — Ten years ago, Sarah O'Neal Rush learned for the first time of the immense source of strength that was part of her family heritage.

The San Lorenzo resident had always been the 16th great-grandchild of Booker T. Washington, a former slave, business advocate and counsel to American presidents, who founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881.

However, when Rush, now 47, attended a family reunion at the university and saw what her great-grandfather had accomplished, it inspired her to change her life.

Rush and her cousin Gloria

Yvonne Jackson recently teamed up to share the life lessons they learned from Washington and to celebrate his 150-year birth anniversary by writing "Timeless Treasures: Reflections of God's Word in the Wisdom of Booker T. Washington."

Each chapter is focused around values that Washington represented and begins with a story written by Rush or Jackson, followed by a selection of quotes from Washington and the Bible. Jackson is an attorney in Southern California.

Rush will speak about her life and present "Timeless Treasures" at 12:30 p.m. Feb. 6 to kick off Black History Month. The talk will be at her alma mater, the College of Alameda, 555 Ralph Appezatto Memorial Parkway, in Alameda.

Though Rush is now an accomplished speaker and therapist, when she attended the family reunion she had been working at Pacific Gas & Electric. The Oakland native grew up in poverty, was a mother at 17 and enjoyed the stability of working for PG&E.

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After returning from the family reunion, Rush threw herself into reading about and studying Washington's life.

"I realized the determination and drive was in me," she said. "I started living in purpose rather than in survival mode."

Inspired, she created and began mailing out a newsletter called "Lifting the Veil" to promote self-improvement and mental health. The newsletter was a tribute to Washington and named after a sculpture at Tuskegee called "Lifting the Veil of Ignorance," which advocated progress through education and industry.

Washington's life also inspired Rush to work toward helping people more directly, and she returned to school and earned a master's degree in psychology. For several years, she was a marriage and family therapist working with at-risk youth in unincorporated parts of the county through a program funded by the Alameda County Probation Department.

Rush realized that she wanted to have a bigger impact.

"I especially want to help African Americans get in touch with their amazing inner power," she said.

At each of her talks, Rush parallels her life and personal "up from slavery" story with Washington's autobiography of the same title.

Rush has switched from counseling to life coaching, helping people who are more self-motivated to change. Her College of Alameda talk will come just after she returns from speaking at a Black Expo in Florida.

There will be more opportunities to hear her talk locally: Feb. 26 at Patten University in Oakland, and March 6 at the Kiwanis Club in Menlo Park. Autographed copies of "Timeless Treasures" are available when purchased online from the products section of <http://www.extraordinarylegacy.net>, which also has more information about Rush's life and the life of Booker T. Washington.

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