

Small Change News
March 2005

Rain Pryor – A One Woman Experience
Touches many lives
By Sue Mayfield-Geiger



It is our privilege to introduce you to a woman whose spirit and courage took her down a path of self-awareness that has transformed into a path for others to follow. It is a name that you will no doubt recognize - a surname that

has been a blessing and a burden combined, yet the adversities associated with anything “pryor” have turned into all things positive that now make up her life and more importantly, her soul.

Meet Rain Pryor: An entertainer who sings, dances, acts, does stand-up comedy, writes, lives and loves. And oh yes, the daughter of famous comedian, Richard Pryor.

Her “coffee with cream” complexion is smooth and glowing; her wild and amazingly lovely “big” hair is totally cool. Her predominate chin that she juts out at the end of her act favors that of Richard’s to a tee. All of these things that she once despised, she now embraces and likes, because they are a part of her. They are a part of her past, her present and her future. More importantly, they are the very things that make her beautiful. Because today, Rain knows she is beautiful, even though she spent most of her young years feeling unloved, uncool and unattractive.

With a white Jewish mother and a black famous father, what are the odds? You are growing up in Beverly Hills and you are surrounded by other show-biz kids. So, what’s not to like about that? Plenty. Rain spent her young years torn between which half of her mattered most. Which half of her should she lean toward? Which half of her was really her?

In high school, she focused on running with the white kids, but was she really white? Her black cheerleader friend Juanita soon set her straight. “Rain was always going out with white boys, and the only black boy she dated wasn’t all that black; he was *blackinese*,” Juanita told her. “Be black and be proud.” But, could she? Rain also wondered which God watched over her? The Jewish one that she learned about at Temple or the black one at her grandmother’s gospel church?

Add to this the fact that Rain’s parents divorced when she was only six-months old. Raised by her single mother (who had to go on welfare) and extended members of both sides of her family, Rain yearned for the father she rarely saw. Richard would go on to marry and divorce several more times and have more children. So, Rain became just “one of the clan.”

Rain’s young adult years were tumultuous. Alcohol, depression, rebellion. She got some acting gigs, even had a starring role in *Head of the Class*. But still, she felt like she didn’t belong, didn’t fit in, wasn’t pretty, and still there was the religion thing. As Rain proclaims in her act: “So there I was, this black and Jewish kid growing up in Beverly Hills, which meant I was proud,...but felt so guilty for it,” she laughs.

It would take Rain several years before she discovered what truly mattered in her life, and she shares those truths with all who come to see her in her amazing one-women show: “Fried Chicken and Latkes, A One Woman Experience” now touring the United States. Told through song and characters, the story takes us on a journey of racial identity, family, career, spiritual growth and love. Rain gives us a glimpse into the universe that was her childhood and is her life, morphing effortlessly, into the people around her.

I had the opportunity to catch Rain’s show last November and talk to her afterwards. Stunningly attractive and petite, she is truly the poster child for National Women’s History Month this year. Here is a woman who took all things dark and negative that consumed

her and turned them into all things bright and beautiful. Then she wrote a skit about it that grew into a 90-minute powerhouse of a show. "Fried Chicken and Latkes" is moving and memorable, going from rip-roaringly funny to emotionally touching to poignant to gut wrenching and back to hysterical.

No costume changes needed for this talented performer, because Rain (attired all in black with minimal props) is performing life experiences – hers. From the deep-throated disciplinary voice of her Jewish mother to the toothless raspy growl of her black grandmother, Rain brings her characters center stage and then, into your heart. Even when impersonating her famous father, if you looked away, you would swear that was Richard Pryor up there asking, "Say What?"

Yet, Richard Pryor was known for his free use of four-letter words and Rain does not sugar coat anything having to do with his comedy. Rather, she tells it like it is; how it was; how it got, then how it somehow all worked out. Rain describes the night Richard almost died after a free-basing episode – how she was in the hospital waiting room with her mother when the doctor came in and said, "Mrs. Pryor?" and eight women stood up.

With her father now in the advanced stages of Multiple Sclerosis, Rain has a loving relationship with Richard and accepts him just as he is. She also has another special relationship in her life these days – Kevin Kindlin, her husband of three years. It was only when Rain came to love herself that she found love

from another. Kevin is also one of the producers of her show.

In order to give you a more complete picture of Rain's amazing persona, I recently contacted her, and she was kind enough to answer some questions. Ladies and gentlemen, here's Rain – completely unedited.

How did your parents meet?

My mother was a dancer on contract with Columbia, and my father was beginning his career as a comic. They met at a club called the Starwood in Hollywood, and from what they have told me, their love was instant. They were together for about two years.

What are some of your first recollections of your father?

He was tall, funny and always seemed very busy doing something...especially women. (laughter)

Judging from your show, he was not around much. About how often did you see him growing up?

I spent almost every holiday or summer with my father up until the age of 18. He would take my brother Richard Jr. my sister Elizabeth and myself away on exotic vacations. However, he wasn't around in the sense of he wasn't a parent who knew how to parent. He wasn't there for the turning points growing up. And frankly, (if he had) I don't think he could have been a success and a genius. You have to be consumed with yourself in order to achieve that kind of genius.

When you were with him, was it a bonding experience?

When I was with my father it was magical and frightening. He would take us fishing or on excursions of some sort, and we would laugh and cuddle. Then there would be the times where he would be off doing his drugs and the doors would be locked to his room, and we could hear him fighting with whomever he was dating at the time. Sometimes violent. With my father there were so many mixed emotions and experiences, it's sometimes hard to capsule.

Although your dad is a comic genius, when did you first begin to realize that he had some major faults?

I don't think as a child I understood he had faults. I just thought, well that's what I had been dealt. When I was in my pre-teens I believe that is when I realized my father was addicted to many things – not just drugs.

Growing up learning about the Jewish faith and being subjected to the Christian gospel via your other grandmother must have been confusing, but also enlightening. Were you able to learn the best from both worlds? How?

I have always had a belief in religious mysticism. I believe in powers beyond our own. I never have believed in one person or thing. It was never confusing to be around Mamma (paternal grandmother) because although she discussed Jesus it was never forced to be my beliefs. Even with Bernice/Bunny (maternal grandmother) I was never forced to embrace Torah or

anything else. The conflict really came from kids in school who identified religion by race. See, where I grew up it was mostly European Jews who, due to their fears of being forced again from their homes, adapted the beliefs that all Jews were like them – white. My presence shook up that pre-conception and almost caused a riot. I was confused because I believed that Judaism is what I am at my core, Israel is a part of my soul and being black is a part of my racial make up. I didn't understand the idea that I had to choose one or the other. What I learned was that many people believe in many different things, even Jews believe there are many categories of Judaism.

I remember from your show that during your teen years, you tried to fit in with the white crowd. But, your black cheerleader friend sort of put everything in perspective for you. Can you elaborate more on that?

I just basically wanted to fit in. Look, Beverly Hills at the time was predominately white and Persian. There were just a few black kids. I was like a loner; a bit of a geek, so I wanted to fit in with the crowd and I liked the cutest boy in school. The reality is I had both black and white friends. But, I knew that some of the boys would go out with me if my hair wasn't so big and if the color of my skin didn't come before the fact that I was Jewish.

You felt unattractive and didn't like yourself much and had a hard time with those growing years. I think all adolescents can relate to that. It must have been particularly hard for you

because you were white, black, Jewish and had a famous father. Now, of course, you have learned to embrace those attributes, but during those formative years, what were some of the things that bothered you the most? How did you deal with them?

What bothered me the most was not looking like everybody else. I was unique looking, still am. I wanted to have a symmetrical face and flatter hair. Back then my mother didn't know I could flat iron my hair. But being that she was also an activist my hair still would have been "natural." I guess inside I was just hoping one day it would change and I would be a part of it. I had so much shame inside that on the outside I think I was angry and somewhat rebellious.

How long were you on *Head of the Class*? Was that a good experience?

Head of the Class was an amazing experience that I was not prepared for at all. I was on the show for three years. I started off as a guest star, and that show ended in a standing ovation, so the next day they called and asked if I would be a series regular. That's how it was back then – easy.

You talk about drinking – did you have an alcohol problem?

You know, when I was younger I believed I was an alcoholic – it was also popular to be one even in recovery. But now that I am 35, and I haven't had a drink in 11 years and because I don't see the point of drinking, I look back at that and think that I was young and had not yet found

myself. You see, I don't think about drinking or smoking or drugs. I don't believe in putting foreign substances into my body, even prescribed things. Although I will if I have too, I'm no martyr. Today I live life on life's terms. I don't like to put things in my body to make me feel a certain way. And alcohol, no matter how little, will make you feel different. I have a deeper soul than that, not to sound better than. That is just my truth.

When did you have that first "ah-ha" moment that made you realize, I am who I am and that's terrific?

I think I had those "ah-ha" moments throughout but wasn't ready to accept them yet. You know, I still struggle with that "I am who I am" thing. I am human. But, perhaps the one moment really came when I came to believe that I deserved more in my life than what I had and accepted. My life changed and I met my love – my husband who taught me love on such a deep profound level and not just on his good looks.

When did you first decide to put your one-woman show together?

Years ago, but I just wasn't ready yet to do it. So, about three years ago I started to do a cabaret show and then "bang" I had a show.

How long have you been doing it?

The bookings are amazing all over the US – it's awesome. I just found out I was nominated for four NAACP Theater Awards, Best Performer, Best Playwright, Best Sound – Jamie Nel-

son, Best Director – Bob Garrett. God has a plan for this; I just need to hold on.

How do you think your show will touch audiences, women in particular?

I hope some women will see themselves and walk away with hope.

You are awesome on stage: singing, doing comedy, acting, some dancing. What do you like to do best?

All of it!

And what's next? Broadway? Cable TV? Films?

I hope Broadway. I also just wrote my first screenplay, and I'm looking forward to collaborating with someone on it.

Tell me about Kevin. How did you meet? How did you now he was the one?

Kevin and I met when I was working as an alcohol and drug therapist /counselor, and so was he. We were friends who over time fell in love. He claims he loved me right away. I claim I was taking things slow because my "picker" was broken, and I didn't want to make the same mistakes I had in the past. I think that's why this relationship is so special – there was time spent getting to really know each other and finding out what real love is about.

What about your life now? I know you are busy with performing and growing your relationship with Kevin. Children in the future?

We would love to have children. Our schedules have been so busy that it's been hard to start a family. We hope the middle of this year will give us time. And yes, we are planning one because we need to plan; that works for us. We may even adopt as well. My life now is beyond amazing; our dreams are coming true.

How is Richard today?

My father is not well and his children are doing what they can to make sure he is surrounded with the best of everything, especially love.

Obviously you have made peace with your dad and other members of your extended family. Do you see Richard often?

I would love to see my father more and he would love to see us more. However, there is a person who stands in the way of my father's desire to be around his family, and so his family is doing all we can to change that.

Famous words you live by?

Speak the truth.

What other career path might you have taken if you were not performing?

Psychologist.

What message would you like to extend to the women of today?

Know your truth and create your dreams.