

Effi Barry Shines at NABJ Weekend

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STROUDSBURG, Pa. -- "I know what it means when a person says they've been raped, because that's kind of how I felt," said Effi Slaughter Barry, in a rare public speech on her life with ex-husband, former Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry.

A guest at the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) regional conference, Effi Barry held the audience of journalists spell-bound as she spoke about the effect media coverage had on herself and her family.

Her ex-husband became notorious when the media exposed his drug addiction and seemingly destroyed his political career as D.C.'s first Black mayor. Since serving a prison term, Marion Barry has won a seat on the Washington, D.C. city council.

To a rapt audience Effi Barry described the pain that the media could cause.

"My first experience with the press was, I guess, maybe somewhere in 1979 in April," she said. "My godmother lived in New York. Every weekend I would go back to New York to visit her because she had terminal cancer. And when I received a call from her son that the hospital said that they could no longer do anything for her and it was just a matter of days, I rushed off to New York.

"I got there on a Tuesday, and on a Wednesday I was lying in bed next to her, and she kind of gasped, and I held onto her and she died in my arms.

"When I got back to Washington I saw a little statement in one of the newspapers that the reason I had not attended the affair at the White House in which President Sadat (Anwar Sadat, the late president of Egypt) and the representative from Israel signed the peace accord was because my husband and I were having marital difficulties."

Professor Barry said that was the incident that let her know what kind of a ride she was in for. It was just one among many examples that she could list of what she called "the great insensitivity that is sometimes exercised by people in the media."

When the truth about her ex-husband's drug addiction was revealed, Professor Barry said her son especially suffered.

"His life has been changed forever," she said, anger and suppressed tears apparent in her voice. "He was afraid to come home. Whenever he would come home after school he would ask me, 'Mommy, is the media going to be there?' Whenever there was a strange car passing us or parked near our drive he would duck down on the floor."

Ultimately, however, she and her son weathered the storm. Now a professor at her alma mater of Hampton University, in Virginia, Barry says she has gone on with her life. But there are still painful press intrusions.

"In fact this past week I got a phone call from a Washington Post reporter who was doing a story on my husband and his new wife -- who happened to be a close associate of mine at one particular time -- and she wanted to know my feelings and reactions to the marriage. Well since I was a lady I didn't tell her what she could do with it (the story)," she said, laughing.

Barry refused to return the phone call. Instead, she urged journalists to be more sensitive in their coverage. "Please remember that you're dealing with the lives of people and that how you report a story or how you write a story can alter the course of their lives forever."

Effi Barry's speech was just one of the highlights of the NABJ regional conference, held Easter weekend (April 1-3) at the Hillside Inn, the only Black-owned resort in the Poconos. Also invited to speak was Dr. Howard A. Myrick, chairman of the Radio-Television-Film (RTF) Department at Temple University, the nation's largest RTF department.

As a communications expert, Dr. Myrick expressed concern over some of the negative consequences of installing an information super highway.

"There is at this moment in history a growing information underclass. . . the information poor," he said. The information poor are overwhelmingly ethnic minorities, and consequently of particular concern to Black journalists, he added.

"I think we as minorities are still consumed by our struggle to get into the (communications) industry. Not how the industry is becoming," he said. But Black journalists must think about these broader issues because

time is running out for the potential members of the information underclass. What will be the effect of already disenfranchised people being further denied, he asks.

"A people who lose control of their own image, lose control of their destiny," Dr. Myrick said.

Journalists must bring this issue into the public eye now, voice concern, discover the needs of the information poor, and establish an investigative agenda on the issue. This is crucial because, he said, the men in power are already determining who may ride the super highway and who may not. Despite reassuring words from the Clinton administration, he said, Clinton is prepared to let the concerns of big business determine the rules of the road.

"Folks," he warned, "this is not future think. This is happening now."

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