

An Anthology of Sisterhood with
L.D. Wells and Dr. Francene Breakfield
By: Michelle Cuttino

I had the pleasure of meeting two wonderful ladies at The 2013 African American Literary Awards Show. Their novel, *An Anthology of Sisterhood* was nominated for the Best in Short Stories/Anthologies category.

Black Literature Magazine caught up with L.D. Wells and Dr. Francene Breakfield to learn more about their backgrounds and their literary project. We would also like to congratulate the ladies on their novel being under consideration for the 45th NAACP Image Awards.

Michelle: L.D., I will start off with you, tell us a little about yourself.

L.D. Wells: I'm an Atlanta native with a background in English. I obtained my formal degree from the University of Georgia where I initially met Dr. Breakfield while we were pledging Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

When I'm not writing or editing, I work for the State of Georgia as an Online Training and Curriculum Specialist. I offer instructional learning opportunities in program policy utilizing both synchronous and a-synchronous learning formats for new and veteran employees.

For fun, I love socializing, dancing and bowling. I also enjoy and attending athletic events, music or art shows and watching good movies. I just can't get enough of either of them!

I have one son - Devon Thomas - who is age 17 and is currently a high school senior.

Michelle: Francene, please do the same and let us know about you as well.

Francene: I go by Fran. My fans call me Frantabulus! I am also an ATLien. I obtained my BS in Psychology from UGA and then a Master's Degree in School Counseling from Georgia Southern Univ. I have been a School Counselor for 17 years. I'm an only child to a preacher and a teacher and I have a Dachshund named Twix. I also own an art business (Picture Perfect Paint Parties) where I pre-sketch canvas and host kids and adult painting parties. My publishing company has recently been responsible for launching the debut careers of authors Amaris Bee (Poetik Penetration) and Tony Gordon (Poetic Journey).

Michelle: You ladies have such amazing backgrounds. How did you come up with the idea for the novel, *An Anthology of Sisterhood*?

L.D. Wells: The initial impetus for *An Anthology of Sisterhood* came out of a dissertation for Dr. Breakfield's EdD entitled "Encircled by Sisterhood: Mentoring Experiences of Women in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc." Using this as the landscape for the vision, we agreed that we wanted to come together to put out a product that dispelled the current media stereotype that women – specifically women of color – cannot work together; or be team players; or support one another in a common goal. We wanted to tackle the labels that have been placed upon us and to display - instead - the antithesis of current mainstream belief. We absolutely thought it would be amazing to allow the world to see unity of spirit amongst educated and progressive women.

Michelle: What was the selection process like? How did you choose who and/or what material did or did not make it in?

Francene: As we began working, it occurred to us that our publication date would coincide with our Sorority's Centennial Celebration. Once this realization was made, it became paramount that all of our contributors be members of our illustrious organization.

The selection process began with choosing Sorors who had particular writing skill composing prose and/or poetry. Those Sorors also introduced us to other equally talented Sorors. We strategically set the contributor panel to only 22 writers in honor of the original 22 women of courage who founded our beloved sorority.

We set an aggressive timeline that included checkpoints for submission of material. Unfortunately, some of the original 22 members did not make the final cut. To be completely fair, any contributor who could not meet the required deadlines, were told in a very sisterly way that we'd have to move forward without their collection. We believe that the final 22 were ordained to be in this project and we are incredibly pleased with how our stories of sisterhood have meshed together to create this award winning book!

Michelle: For those who may not understand your roles as "co-editors", please explain what all co-editing entails in relationship to this project.

L.D. Wells: As co-editors, we worked together to determine the contributors and to set a timetable for submissions. As the project gained momentum, we determined a strategy for organizing the chapters, completing the layout and editing the rough draft submission.

Specifically, we had to agree on content as well as overarching theme of the work. We worked together to edit each piece for grammar, style and flow.

Lastly, we compiled an initial draft and then forwarded each contributor their individual chapter back to them for final review prior to going to print. We have often been referred to as Yin and Yang! Dr. Breakfield is strongest in creative endeavors whereas Ms. Wells is strongest in organization. We respect each other's opinions and what we individually bring to the table. We have been blessed to be able to use our crafts to propel each other to greater heights - something we've known since our early days pledging together.

We help each other and encourage one another in ways that make us feel that we both have a lot to offer and simultaneously reinforce unconditional support in the areas in which we are lacking. It's effortless. We're best friends and co-laborers. We bring out the best in one another.

Michelle: I know that you are both members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and were actually linesisters. How has your friendship blossomed since then?

Francene: We pledged the Zeta Psi Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc on the University of Georgia's campus in Winter 1994. We were a line of 27 named "Waiting to Exhale" (Ironically, this is the title of author Terry McMillan's book from the previous year). Fran was #2 (the deuce) with Nike as her line name and LD (affectionately called Neicy by her linesisters) was #9 and her line name is UPS.

In 2014, we celebrate 20 years of sisterhood and are planning a trip to Jamaica with our linesisters. We have always been there for each other individually and collectively as a line. The same level of support has inevitably transferred over into our lives beyond Delta as Fran is also the Godmother of LD's only son.

Michelle: What are some of the topics covered in *An Anthology of Sisterhood*?

L.D. Wells: While it was important for everyone contributing to the book to be a member of our sorority, it was equally important that we cover *every aspect* of sisterhood. So, this book is **not** just for Deltas. We cover topics that are universally important to promoting the idea of sisterhood such as positive relationships among women, spirituality, friendship, sorority life, sibling rivalry, and gender equity.

Michelle: Francene, what does your chapter include and why did you choose to write about the topic(s)?

Francene: My chapter is the first chapter, Cardinal Compositions. The first piece includes all 22 shades of red and how we blend together like a quilt coming together to tell a story. I have another piece dedicated to a dear friend and soror that passed away last year . . . Just my final goodbye to her. The other pieces in my collection talk about how we should love our sisters no matter their size, shape, or color...we should love and respect one another.

Michelle: L.D. same question. Tell us about your chapter.

L.D. Wells: My chapter is the final chapter, The Crimson Collection. Ideally, many of my pieces are about sisterhood, sorority life and honoring our beloved Founders of Delta Sigma Theta. However, I also wrote pieces dedicated to my friends and those who are as close as a sister. Additionally, I included an intensely personal piece that is dedicated to my baby sister, Keitra, because she was the first to teach me what sisterhood truly means.

I wrap up my chapter with a poem dedicated to members of our Sorority who have preceded us in death. Understanding that this is a difficult subject to broach for many, I wanted to write something to give us a voice when going through a Soror's time of transition.

Michelle: Santa Barbara College in California has adopted *An Anthology of Sisterhood* as required reading for their Fall 2013 Ethnic Studies course. How did that come about?

Francene: This was so awesome! We actually got a call from the Santa Barbara College Bookstore announcing that Dr. Magdalena Torres had interest in ordering copies of our book for the Fall 2013 Ethnic Studies course. When we inquired about how she has heard of us, we were told that she does a tremendous amount of research on latest books and trends in her field and had come across our work on her own. This was exciting because we had it on our exhaustive "to do" list to approach colleges and universities, but this happened before we ever made contact with a single school. We believe it's a confirmation of our dreams coming true. We've written the vision and now it's coming to pass. We couldn't be more pleased.

Michelle: The novel was also nominated in the Short/Story Anthology category of the African American Literary Awards. What is the impact on the both of you for receiving so many accolades on this project?

L.D. Wells: We believed in this book from the moment we began working on it! We strategically placed the book in certain areas where it would gain the traffic needed to have it considered for awards and nominations. Every accolade

moves us forward to something new and greater. We recognize that during the award process, we are meeting new people and networking in ways that enhance us as authors and also in ways that align us with the literary community.

Michelle: Francene, what do you hope *An Anthology of Sisterhood* will bring to its readers. What do you want them to walk away with?

Francene: We hope that *An Anthology of Sisterhood* will bring to our readers a renewed sense of what it means to promote love, decency and self-respect for all women. We want women to begin to have the conversations that need to be had. More than ever, we want women to recognize that it is our responsibility to promote peace and harmony with all of our sisters.

Additionally, we want them to walk away with a deeper appreciation for all types of prose and poetry. We very thoughtfully made sure that all genre types were included in the book. So, no matter whether you prefer poetry, prose, lyric, or even a sermon – there is something in this book for you!

Michelle: L.D., the book's Foreword is by an African American legend and icon, Ruby Dee. How did you secure her contribution?

L.D. Wells: We were ecstatic to have Ruby Dee – one of our most celebrated Sorority sisters – to contribute the Foreword for *An Anthology of Sisterhood*! One of our contributors just happened to work in the same school system with one of Ruby Dee's daughters. Through that connection, we were able to send a formal request to Mrs. Dee and her management team. We included a draft copy of the book along with the request . . . and the rest is history.

Michelle: What has been the overall response on the project thus far?

Francene: We spent many nights up at three in the morning on the phone chatting about ways to make *An Anthology of Sisterhood* more thoughtful and relevant to readers. We talked about details that would go over well with readers, and it still amazes us when someone confirms that a particular direction we took was on point. For example, we get a lot of feedback like "I love that you included each contributor's photo and bio before her chapter begins." We laugh as we remember that the idea to do so actually came out of one of those early morning chats.

We were incredibly happy to see our own sorority embrace the project by inviting us to participate in the Centennial Celebration Author's Pavilion in Washington, DC this past summer! Our names will go down in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority history as featured authors for the 100 year celebration!

Overall, we are reaching the audiences we desired to reach and word is spreading fast about our book. We are overjoyed with the response we have received thus far and are looking forward to what is to come.

Michelle: Is the project being well received outside of the Delta Sigma Theta sisterhood as well?

L.D. Wells: It's also really cool to hear ladies from other sororities compliment us on the work that we've done. We have a growing fan base that is coming directly from other Greek organizations. We're very pleased that they haven't tried to peg this as "just a Delta book", but actually see the relevance it has for all women.

We have also found a home both within book clubs, churches and schools. Women are coming together to read our work as groups and to spark dialogue about the many facets of sisterhood. Most notably was the adoption of our book by Santa Barbara College as required reading for an Ethnic Studies course. In October, our Alma Mater, the University of Georgia (UGA) affirmed our work in tangible ways. First, they added us both to the roster of UGA Alumni Authors. Then, University Bookstore invited us to participate in their annual Alumni Authors Book Signing. We are thrilled that the bookstore where we once purchased our textbooks for class is now carrying our book on its shelves. This was truly a full circle moment for us!

Michelle: L.D., what have you found to be the hardest part of self-publishing thus far?

L.D. Wells: Promotion! Promotion! Promotion! We have found that self-publishing itself is not a difficult task at all. However, once the book has been finalized, you're on your own. There's no one to tell you how to market or to assist with distribution. There's no agent to handle your public relations. There's no budget to pay for your expenses. Nothing is handed to you. What we've found, though, is that this is actually a blessing. The sky is the limit for us. We can promote however we like. We can choose any direction that works well for us. We're working for ourselves and our profit is ours. There's no middle man and we love it!

Michelle: Francene, what can we expect next from the two of you? Will you continue to collaborate, or will you be releasing solo projects?

Francene: We are looking to schedule a writing retreat for early 2014. We are hoping to simply "get lost" for a small amount of time and dedicate ourselves to finishing a couple of projects that are currently in the works. We will be releasing

more collaboration pieces in the near future – as well as some individual projects that were previously put on the back burner. This alliance works for us and we have much more to share with the world.

Michelle: Please tell us how readers and fans can contact and/or follow you.

L.D. Wells: Readers can log on to our website at www.sisterhood.biz. They can also like us on our Facebook Page -- An Anthology of Sisterhood -- and follow us on Twitter @Anthologyof. For booking information, send details to ldwellsauthor@gmail.com .