

## No opening night jitters for newest star in Carter family

Written by Deb Pleasants , TC Daily Planet

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At age ten, Ward already displays a level of self-confidence equal to other members of the esteemed Carter family. Following in the footsteps of grandmother Toni Carter and uncle Melvin Carter III and other family members, this Crossroads Elementary fourth-grader is showing she, too, has acting talent.

This week she opened portraying the lead role in Steppingstone Theatre's latest production Ruby! The Story of Ruby Bridges.

Ward infuses some of her own charming personality as well as the mannerisms of her six-year-old sister Afiya into the character of Ruby. However, she tries not to over-analyze her role.

Knowing she is portraying an important historical figure has left a lasting impression. "Sometimes I feel sad for what she had to go through," Ward said, "but, at the same time I feel glad because she did that...It would be really cool if she came to see the play."

Ward's desire to act comes naturally. She is part of the next generation of artists and performers in the Carter family. Her mother, Anika Ward, is the executive director of ARTS-Us—a nonprofit, community-based program whose stated mission is "to develop young leaders in and through the arts." The program was co-founded 15 years ago by Ward's grandmother, Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter.

Toni Carter points out that the Carters have been involved in the arts for several generations. Many were actors, storytellers and musicians; some even performed in the circus.

"We're a family of performers," she said.

Toni Carter is a veteran of the stage herself. In 1971, Carter moved here from Cleveland, OH to attend Carleton College. While there, she joined the Carleton Thespian Society and the Carleton Black Actors. Upon graduation, she relocated to the Twin Cities where she worked at IBM during the day and performed at Penumbra Theatre at night.

"Penumbra became my second home early on," she said.

Her love of the arts and belief that they help develop the whole person led her to leave corporate America and become a teacher at Crosswinds School in Woodbury—a school that engages students in academics through the arts. Later, she was elected to the Saint Paul School Board where she advocated for the arts.

Even now as a County Commissioner, Carter sits on the board for ARTS-Us. In its 15-year history she has personally seen many talented people in the program rise up to become leaders.

"Many of them are storytellers and great speakers. One of them, my son, is on the city council," she said.

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Saint Paul Councilmember Melvin Carter III is Toni Carter's son and Amani Ward's uncle. He took part in several community theatre programs including SteppingStone and ARTS-U.S. That early experience may have helped prepare him for the political stage. He believes being in front of an audience helped build self-confidence. Although he enjoyed acting, he discovered he connected more deeply with the audience through storytelling—an art he learned from watching his mother.

"I felt I could break down that invisible barrier with the audience," Councilmember Carter said. "It's not just about acting or storytelling. It's about learning to communicate effectively."

Like her uncle, Ward is also involved with ARTS-U.S. She attends their afterschool program and is part of their young storytellers program. This summer she hopes to be part of the cast for their original production Kumbayah—The Juneteenth Story, which is a story commemorating the end of slavery.

With so much talent to draw from, Ward had several family members offering support and guidance. Someone was always willing to help her practice her lines. She is clearly a dedicated performer; however, while preparing for the show, there were times she preferred to do other kid-centered activities.

"They forced me to practice every single day of my break...I couldn't play my Wii," Ward said.

Her family's intense level of involvement has not dissuaded Ward from pursuing an acting career. Although she can envision herself someday starring in a TV show, she is not ruling out a possible future in politics. She said her long-range goals may include someday becoming president. Whatever she pursues, she knows she has the full support of her family.

"They want me to follow my dreams," Ward said.

Councilmember Carter sees his niece, and all of the Carter children, as the next generation of leaders. "I charted my own path, yet it's not dissimilar from my mother's path. Whatever they do, whether it is acting, politics or being a neurosurgeon, it will be through a lens of wanting to improve the community."

Ruby! The Story of Ruby Bridges will play from now until March 1. Tickets are: Children/Seniors-\$9; Adults-\$11. For show times for this play or information about the remaining plays this season, contact Steppingstone at (651) 225-9265 or visit their website at <http://www.steppingstonetheatre.org/>

Deb Pleasants worked as a probation officer for 15 years prior to becoming a stay-at-home-mom. In addition to caring for her son, she is a freelance writer and citizen journalist. She resides in St. Paul with her family.