

Robin Hickman: Community treasure

Written by Maya Beecham and Mahmoud El Kati
Sunday, 14 October 2012 07:18



On a late sunny fall afternoon at a busy café in St. Paul, a woman in her early thirties talked with a teenage girl to whom she was recently introduced.

The girl's eyes lit up as she shared her vision for impacting the world by promoting positive self-image through fashion. As the girl talked, the woman envisioned the possibilities, and recognized the energy of making dreams reality. At a point in their conversation the woman who orchestrated this impromptu meeting sat watching with tears in her eyes, as her current intern talked with a longtime mentee that she met when the mentee was just 14 years of age.

On Friday, Oct. 19, from 7 p.m. – 9 p.m., at Subtext Bookstore, 165 Western Ave., N, in St. Paul, Hickman will serve as the keynote speaker for CommUniversity of Minnesota.

Robin Hickman, community leader, visionary, friend, mentor and sister brought the woman and girl together. Hickman has quietly led a versatile success-filled career with international impact. Yet, for years she has made a point to return to the community she grew up in and reinvest the values, wisdom and vision that were imparted in her life, onto youth. Hickman sees her work as an inherent responsibility.

"It was instilled in me at a young age by my mother, father, my grandmother, primarily, and then many people in the village to be a servant leader," said Hickman. "So I think that I am a servant-leader with an emphasis on servant. But I think that when God has called you to guide or shepherd that you can't play small in that leadership part. It references in the Bible that a true leader is a servant first. I remember being in a meeting where Mahmoud El Kati emphasized that. I truly always wanted to nurture the servant side of leadership first."

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As a servant Hickman nurtures lives. From her office on Selby Avenue and Milton Street in St Paul, Hickman formulates strategies to improve the lives of youth on a grand scale. She is the CEO and executive producer of SoulTouch Productions, a television and film production, youth mentorship and media consulting company, with a mission to make meaningful media and produce powerful social impact experiences. The business of SoulTouch is to plant seeds of hope in young people and present, "visions of possibilities."

This investment of hope has an international footprint.

For the past eight years, hundreds of young girls have been universally inspired – from St. Paul to Africa, Israel, Indonesia, and beyond, by "Lovin' the Skin I'm In" (Lovin') Hope & Healing Movement, of which Hickman is the founder and curriculum developer. Lovin' is a SoulTouch partnership initiative for youth, inspired by Sharon G. Flake's book "The Skin I'm In."

The movement explores societal standards of beauty and media influences on self-esteem and identity. Hickman has coordinated Lovin' events featuring Flake, "A Girl Like Me" award-winning New York filmmaker Kiri Davis and actor, writer and director Kimberly Elise. The Lovin' Movement is featured in the Itasca Project and TPT documentary, "Close the Gap: Race Disparities." SoulTouch produced a short video for Flake's latest book, "You Don't Even Know Me," which is a collection of poems and short stories about young urban males.

From project to project Hickman expands the concept of "village" to include community members, celebrities and major institutions to uplift youth and the communities in which they live. "Taking Our Place... Center Stage" is an Ordway Center and SoulTouch partnership commitment, which will more deeply engage community members of African descent in organizational wide opportunities. Hickman also works with the Ordway Center's production, marketing and community/education engagement programs, which have included "The Color Purple," "The Gospel at Colonus" and a St. Paul Public Schools Arts Partnership initiative with the Gordon Parks High School. She has also worked with VocalEssence as a consultant and the Walker Art Center on various community events, which included a screening of HBO's "Jim Brown: All American" by Spike Lee.

Hickman never gets caught up in the glory of her work, or the occasional celebrity she encounters on various projects. It's her commitment to carry on familial legacy and promote cultural heritage. She made a promise to her great uncle – the late Gordon Parks, world-renowned photographer, musician, writer, and film director.

"I was deliberate in infusing his life into the lives of young people," said Hickman. "My last visit with Uncle Gordon in New York we talked about how he was very concerned and he said what is going to happen with Black boys. And he was very emotional. And he asked what is going to happen with all that (he) did. I promised him that I would do the best I could do with others and the family and beyond to make sure his legacy lived on in a significant way that it transforms lives. That is what he was most proud of me about. To do a major documentary on his life on HBO while he was living was amazing."

Currently, Hickman is working on implementing, In the Footsteps of Gordon Parks Initiative, a

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program focused on continuing Parks' works. The Tell-A-Vision Crew and CHOICE of Weapons (inspired by Parks' autobiography) projects are SoulTouch social development initiatives, which engage youth in a multimedia production and community building.

One of Hickman's greatest passions is her multicultural SoulReal Doll Community – a collection of restyled Mattel dolls posed in original sets and outfits with props created by Hickman. Each doll is has a story about its lifestyle and career. Hickman uses the dolls in motivational presentations to inspire creativity, positive self-esteem and promote cultural diversity. Her collection has been featured on HGTV, in the Star-Tribune newspaper, the *Mpls/ St. Paul Magazine* and her original doll hats were displayed at the Guthrie Theater during its presentation of the play "Crowns."

Hickman takes nothing for granted in her journey. Everything is utilized as a tool to enhance souls she encounters on a daily basis.

"I am a woman that is unapologetically in love with my history, heritage, my people, and also humanity," said Hickman. "But at the foundation of being a lover of humanity has to first be grounded in having love for who I am and who my people are. Understanding that I will always be not just an advocate, but an activist, a warrior for the richness of my people, being a part of the humanity equation."

Hickman's career began at the age of 12 at Inner City Youth League, where she produced her first documentary film entitled, "Black Women in the Metro Area." At the age of 15 she produced and hosted community media programming for radio station KUXL and served as an on-air reporter at KSTP-TV interviewing R&B artists George Clinton and Evelyn "Champagne" King. After college she worked in Public Affairs Programming at WCCO-TV and was the host of "NAACP Forum" on KSTP-TV.

Hickman graduated from St. Paul Central High School and received a B.A. in communications from Howard University.

"I remember before going to college, Mahmoud said, 'Robin you have to go out there and get the knowledge but you have to bring it back to the village.' That's one of the main reasons I came back home."

Hickman worked for nine years at Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) as Executive Producer of Community Affairs Programming. She developed and managed local and national public affairs programming, documentaries and community outreach initiatives, including national award winning "Don't Believe the HYPE" (Emmy), "HOOP Dreams Reunion" (NAACP Image Award nominee), and "From Corrections to Community," a documentary co-produced by residents of Redwing Correctional Facility.

In her position at TPT, Hickman made a point to provide opportunities for youth of color to take their rightful place, by working in all aspects of television production.

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"One of the things I have always tried to instill in young people is that if you walk with me I want you to walk extraordinary, to walk in excellence, to be able to recognize when an extraordinary opportunity is in your path. Just to prepare for it and not fear it," said Hickman. "I have always told people that I expect you to be better than me to go beyond me. It gives me great honor to step aside so that a young person I have walked with can stand in my stead that is what it has to be about."

Hickman has every right to rest on her laurels, but it wouldn't be characteristic of her. She is rooted in the values instilled in her by her mother, the late Patricia Ellen Frazier-Hickman. A longtime intimate friend of the family had observed that, "above all, Robin is a devoted and loving daughter in memory of her late mother. She has learned valuable lessons from her mother's wisdom which she religiously applies to her daily life."

Her mother would often tell her and her siblings to take their rightful places and, "be humble but know your worth."

"That's why people think they know me and they don't know me," said Hickman. "Yes, I am a five-foot eight inches, full-figured bold voiced black woman. I think a lot of people think because of my demeanor that I think that I am whatever and I am really just a woman trying to love the skin she's in and walk in that worth."

Hickman misses her mother deeply, and sees her as the very essence of her being.

"I know that she wants us to continue – all of her children – to walk in what God has called me to do and walk in what she inspired and prepared me well to do. I am a woman who for the rest of my life will tell my mother's story," said Hickman. "I am at a moment where I feel God's favor and I am feeling the hand of my mother in almost everything I do. I have had an extraordinary life but it started with a very extraordinary foundation as a child growing up here in St. Paul."