



NAPPY

A POEM TO MY DAUGHTER

Local Poet Charisse Carney-Nunes offers up new children's book

BY MICHELLE PHIPPS-EVANS

In the African Diaspora, black women have interacted with nappy hair. To some, it has been a love-hate relationship and an endless cycle of women loving the hair but hating the maintenance or the length or some other aspect of it. And even when the woman herself may not have “nappy,” kinky, tightly coiled or coarse hair, she will still come face to face with family members who do – either child or lover or parent or friend.

According to Toby Tobias, a dance critic who wrote in the *Dance Insider* in her review of “Hair Stories” and “Crowns,” people in the black diaspora have long been shamed by the thick, tight-curling nature of their hair, their self-image undermined by its being judged ugly, even somehow “bad,” by a dominant white culture fixated on European ideals of beauty. But in recent decades, the descendants of African-American slaves have rediscovered African concepts of glorious hair and used them audaciously to cultivate self-expression, self-worth and cultural identity.

It is from this place of cultural identity and self-worth that District resident Charisse Carney-Nunes writes her recent book, *Nappy*. The book, geared toward African-American girls, relates to “the strength of our struggle as African-American women and all we have been through,” Carney-Nunes, 38, said.

“I take the book from a historical perspective,” said Carney-Nunes who lives in Columbia Heights with her husband of 10 years, Harvey, and their two children, a 6-year-old girl and a 14-month-old boy.

Carney-Nunes, a New Jersey-born and bred mother-activist-poet-writer-lawyer, came up with the concept for the book in such a simple and easy manner.

“I came up with it after a three-hour

session of doing my daughter’s nappy hair,” she explained. “She was about three and she was looking at me with big eyes, asking why did it hurt. I did not know what to say.

“So, I had to think fast and I told her, ‘God wants to make you strong. He couldn’t give you anything thing you can’t handle,’” she said. Then, she started thinking of other women before her who saw their hair as a gift, to make them strong. From there, the book, a poem to her daughter, started to take shape.

The brightly illustrated 26-page book starts with a mother looking into the eyes of her little girl, explaining about her nappy hair, while tugging and pulling, snapping, cracking and popping it. Carney-Nunes sprinkles the book with such new words as “super-nappaturally nappy” and the more familiar, “break the comb nappy.” The book is a simple read for children with simple adjectives describing nappy hair.

Our hair is “super-abundantly nappy ... super-eminently nappy ... left-hand turn nappy ... scream for a perm nappy,” she writes. And just as one thinks it will get worse, the book takes a turn in the line, “But girl, God didn’t give us nothing we couldn’t handle.”

From there, the poem delves into his-

tory.

“It’s ‘back of the bus’ nappy, it’s ‘Underground Railroad’ nappy, ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ Nappy.” It illustrates photos of civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks, the Underground Railroad leader Harriet Tubman and civil rights activist Sojourner Truth.

“It’s Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, Ida B. Wells, Sonia Sanchez and Angela Davis ... Nappy,” the book expounds on some famous names in Black history.

At the back of the book, Carney-Nunes added biographical vignettes of the 10 African-American women, each of whom has contributed in some way.

“In the African-American community, nappy is a concept and a state of mind,” Carney-Nunes explained about her writing about this particular topic. “It’s part of our cultural awareness to be accepting of who we are as a people.”

The idea behind including women such as Parks and Tubman, according to the author, was that they were women from the same tradition of strong black women contributing to the ideal for her son and daughter as they grow up to become excellent young adults in society.

“Nappy is such a special book and sto-

ry concept that I felt I had to give it its due,” said Carney-Nunes. “It is a celebration of self-worth, cultural awareness and strength and it is a tribute to women of African ancestry and their super-nappaturally nappy hair.” The story was included in her first book, *Songs of a Sistermom: Motherhood Poems*, which came out in 2004.

“That book was really successful for a book of poetry,” said Carney-Nunes who sold about 15,000 copies. “Even though it is beautifully done, it was a hard sell.” Yet, wherever she did a reading, once she read the poem, “Nappy,” from the book, “it would evoke extreme responses from the audience.”

“I wanted to take it all by itself and turn it into a concept all by itself,” she said. In one reading, one woman lifted up herself and affirmed, “My hair is nappy.” So, Carney-Nunes took the original idea and made the book a children’s book. She met the illustrator Ann Marie Williams, the 2006 National Cherry Blossom Festival Art award, at an event where they discussed their own hair. From there, the two women collaborated and “Nappy” was born.

“It didn’t take too long to put together,” Carney-Nunes said about the book that took about five months in 2005 to be completed and sent to the printer. “Most of the time was when I was dealing with the artist. The author did her own research on the women by exploring the Internet, the libraries, the history books and just her own knowledge and background.

Carney-Nunes, who attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and is a Harvard Law school graduate, wrote the book sticking to the actual history as much as possible without becoming too technical.

"History is written by the winners," she said. "I want my kids to know they are winners."

Based on the reaction that Carney-Nunes received from performing the poem "Nappy" when she did it from "Songs of a Sisternom," she expects the children's book to be successful.

"Charise is one of the most dynamic poets to have ever performed for us," writes Andrea McIntyre, office of equal opportunity programs at the National Science Foundation (NSF) on Carney-Nunes' Web site. "Her 'Nappy' mantra hit a nerve with the audience and has since resounded throughout the building again and again, with women repeating it - 'NAPPY!'" Carney-Nunes has performed her poetry at such venues as Union Station's Main Hall, Starbucks-Chinatown, the Martin Luther King Jr., Memorial Library, Sisterspace & Books, the NSF and at numerous religious, social and cultural events.

For right now, Carney-Nunes, who works as an assistant general counsel at the NSF, has been reaching out to the District's libraries and elementary schools to spread the word about the book in light of February being Black History Month and March being Women's History Month. She is scheduled to do a reading at the elementary schools in New Jersey.

District residents can buy the book for \$14.99 at the Busboys and Poets restaurant/bookstore at 14th and V streets in northwest, Douglas Discount near 22nd and Rhode Island in northeast and the Karibu Book store in Bowie, Md. The book will be available nationwide in April.

Carney-Nunes added that she is working on a "sequel" to the book.

"It's going to be something for boys," she said. "I want my son to know about strong black women but I also want him to know more of his history." She did not delve too much into the content of the next book. But she did add that she is working on a spoken word version of "Nappy" to distribute as a CD. She may also do a CD of her first book as well. ■

PICK UP A COPY

For more information or to order *Nappy* visit Carney-Nunes' website at www.brandnuwords.com or visit Busboys and Poets restaurant/bookstore at 14th and V Streets, NW; Douglas Discount near 22nd and Rhode Island, NE or Karibu Books in Bowie, Md. Call her company, Nunes Production at 877.387.1314 or e-mail her at charisse@nunesproductions.com.

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