

Black History Profile: Arlette Miller Smith
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(Photo: Provided)

Arlette Miller Smith's voice sounds as powerful as it does gentle when she emerges before a Memorial Art Gallery audience during a reception for "Inspiring Beauty, 50 years of Ebony Fashion Fair."

She walks out confidently in a long black robe trimmed in red and stands poised — then conversationally presents a soulful song of the Akoma African-American Women's Gospel Choir, which she founded years ago.

Smith's voice reaches young people and women across Rochester, and it was developed through a history of diverse experiences, education and faith.

“It was an honor to receive her assistance as I navigate every element of my life,” says Tokeya Graham, an assistant professor of English and philosophy at Monroe Community College, Damon City Campus. “She’s a scholar, a humanitarian, a role model, a mentor . . . a friend,” adds Graham. “I am thankful that our worlds have intersected in the myriad ways that they have.”



Arlette Miller Smith, PhD, of St. John Fisher College and Akoma women's choir. (Photo: Provided)

Rochesterians can hear from the Voices of Thunder and the Akoma choir on Saturday evening during the city of Rochester's Black Heritage gospel songfest at First Genesis Baptist Church, 292 Hudson Ave.

“The group adopted the name Akoma because it symbolizes our African heritage, spiritual roots and desire to serve the Rochester community,” says Smith, an associate professor of Interdisciplinary studies and English at St. John Fisher College.

Though she has become a keynote speaker, poet and dramatist, her recollections of growing up in the South — during the Jim Crow era — remain a part of her heritage.

Her history

“It was 1964,” Smith recalls. “I was around 14 years old when I snuck away from my grandparents’ house to hear Martin Luther King Jr., deliver a speech at Pleasant Green Baptist Church, in my hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi. I made sure I found a place to sit at the end of the row.

“I can remember the chattering of several hundred people, suddenly come to an absolute quell. It was an indication to everyone that King was about to enter the church. At the same moment, the doors swung open, we heard a loud explosive sound, like a bomb went off. King, along with everyone else, including myself, dived to the floor.”

It was a relief to everyone that the loud noise came from a brown paper bag. A child had blown up the bag like a balloon and popped it by pounding it with his fist. The incident at the church inspired Smith to write a poem titled “Thy KINGdom Has Come: Martin Luther King in Vicksburg, MS.”

Smith is known for her motivating presentations and captivating addresses.

At age 5, her role at the Seventh-day Adventist Church her family attended was to read a mission story every Saturday during religious services.

After awhile, she started putting more emphasis in the way she read it and through this experience, she began reading and reciting poetry, and writing her own poems. Every few weeks after church, she would walk to the library, where people of color were permitted to get a bag of books, then she would take them home.

The books were mostly classical novels written by white authors, such as *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. The classical novels offered a diverse alternative of the vast literary world when compared to African-American authors she commonly was exposed to in school, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker Alexander.

Her education



Dr. Arlette Smith, is professor of African American literature, American Studies and Women & Gender Studies at St. John Fisher College. (Photo: Jamie Germano/@jgermano1/, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Smith's ability to blend poetic prose with sacred spiritual hymns afforded her the option to choose between a music scholarship and an academic scholarship to Tougaloo College in Mississippi. The campus was a safe haven for civil rights workers. While attending Tougaloo, Smith received a rare opportunity to take a class taught by Alice Walker, who wrote the critically acclaimed novel *The Color Purple*.

Smith graduated in the summer of 1970, a year early, earning a bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in African-American literature and composition. She then obtained a master's degree in English at Michigan State University.

She earned a doctor of philosophy degree from the State University at Buffalo. That was rare in her day. According to "U.S. Doctorates in the 20th Century," a National Science Foundation report, "of the doctorates awarded to U.S. citizens, the share earned by members of minority groups was 8 percent in 1975-1979. Less than 1 percent of those doctorates were awarded to minority women."

Smith came to St. John Fisher College in 1997 on a dual appointment to teach English and to begin some diversity initiatives. Three years after that, President Katherine Keogh named her founding dean of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Diversity Programs.

She now is director of African American studies and teaches classes in the Executive Leadership Doctoral Program as well as her other duties.

"I have known Arlette for almost 15 years. We first worked together in a mentoring program at Fisher called CONNECT," says Dan Edes, manager of Barnes & Noble College Bookstore on campus.

Smith founded the CONNECT mentoring and student leadership program, which has a mission to create a campus climate that embraces, supports, and affirms undergraduate students from "racialized" and other underrepresented ethnicities.

"I was also involved for many years with the Martin Luther King Celebration committee which she chaired. In both these areas, I saw Arlette's passion for championing inclusiveness at St. John Fisher College, her detailed knowledge, both historical and current, of events surrounding diversity, and her insistence for perfection in executing these programs," Edes points out.

"She brings these traits out to the community as well, organizing a group of us to attend the showing of the movie *Help* and hold discussions with the audience after each. If these three traits aren't impressive enough, on top of that, she's a rousing poet and an incredible, good singer," he said.

Although she eventually chose to pursue academics over music more than 20 years ago at Tougaloo College, Smith has found herself at the center of Rochester's gospel music scene.

And for more than five years, the city has teamed up with Akoma for an annual joint gospel songfest to support scholarships for graduating high school seniors.

Rodney Brown is a Rochester-based freelance writer.

If you go

What: Heritage Gospel Concert

Performers: Akoma African-American Women Gospel Choir and Voices of Thunder

Where: First Genesis Baptist Church, 292 Hudson Ave.

When: 6 to 8 p.m.Saturday, Feb. 27

Purpose: Support scholarships for graduating seniors.

For more info:blackheritage@cityofrochester.gov or (585) 428-9857

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Pictures below added by AMS (2/28/16)

2-27-2016 City of Rochester Heritage Concert with AKOMA & Voices of Thunder. Arlette with City of Rochester County Court candidate, Melissa Barrett



AKOMA, Rochester's African American Women's Gospel Choir
Founded 1998 by Arlette Miller Smith (some of the 50 members from various Rochester churches)

