

Second Edition

HUSH

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An African American Family Breaks Their
Silence on Sexuality & Sexual Abuse

DeShannon Bowens

***Hush Hush: An African American
Family Breaks Their Silence on
Sexuality & Sexual Abuse***

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Excerpt of HUSH HUSH the Play, appears with permission of playwright, Aquaila S. Barnes

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Preface

Sexual assault occurs in the United States every 107 seconds to individuals who are 12 years of age and older*. I shared this with a group of seminary students I spoke with a few years ago. I asked them what they believed should be done to prevent child sexual abuse. A mother raised her hand and went into detail about how carefully she watched her daughter. She bought the “right” clothes to hide her child’s shape as much as possible because she was developing at a young age. I asked, “What do you think you’re teaching your daughter about her body?” She paused for a moment and disclosed she was a survivor. This mother wanted to do everything in her power to protect her child. With compassion and a gentle approach, I helped her realize she could empower her daughter more by teaching her personal boundaries and how to love her body instead of being afraid of it.

When *Hush Hush* was first published eight years ago, I did not consider the fear black parents could have watching their children sexually develop – especially girls. This fear has historical roots that go beyond one generation. My conversation

*According to the U.S. Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) there's an average of 293,066 victims (*age 12 or older*) of rape and sexual assault each year. There are 525,600 minutes in a non-leap year. That makes 31,536,000 seconds/year. So, 31,536,000 divided by 293,066 comes out to 1 sexual assault every 107 seconds. Retrieved from: <https://rainn.org/get-information/statistics/frequency-of-sexual-assault>.

with the seminary students let me know it was time to revisit *Hush Hush* and focus more attention on the shame surrounding black sexuality and where it comes from. By exploring the Peterson family's narratives more deeply, I knew I would come across things I had overlooked and gain new insights that could be useful to people who care about safety and nurturing communities.

Sexuality is the fabric of life that connects human beings. It is beautifully complex, natural and sacred. When an act of sexual violence happens, it hurts everyone. The victim, perpetrator and bystanders are forever changed. As a secondary survivor of sexual abuse by way of my friends and loved ones, I offer this second edition of *Hush Hush* in hopes that it will speak to a wider group of people and provide guidance for healing and prevention.

DeShannon Barnes-Bowens

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Introduction

Fifteen years ago I travelled from St. Louis to New York to see the place where I would spend the next few years of my life. On the plane ride I sat next to a woman who smelled like alcohol. She asked me, “Are you from St. Louis?” I told her I was. “Why are you going to New York?” With a lot of enthusiasm I explained I was starting graduate school to study counseling and psychology. “That’s good. What are you going to do when you finish?” I hesitated telling her but responded, “I’m going to help people who’ve been sexually abused.” Silence.

She asked the flight attendant for a drink. Once she had it, she shared a story with me. When her son was 4 years old, he would often play with a 5-year-old boy next door. They usually spent time at her house because the 5-year-old’s parents worked late. One day she heard a very disturbing conversation coming from her son’s room. The 5-year-old said, “Pull your pants down. It’s okay. You can put it in my mouth. My daddy says it’s okay.”

When the mom opened the door the 5-year-old started shaking and said, “I didn’t do nothin’. I didn’t do nothin’.” Then he ran out of the room. She looked at her son, whose clothes were still on and asked if he was all right. He nodded yes but looked very confused. When she found the 5-year-old downstairs he was still shaking and said he wanted to go home. That evening she took him home and spoke to his mother.

“I was very uncomfortable. I told her what happened, what I heard and how scared her son was. She shrugged it off and said it was probably nothing but would talk to her husband

when he got home. I couldn't believe it. She blew it off like it was a misunderstanding. Our sons didn't play together anymore after that."

This was the first time someone disclosed to me. Many stories like this would follow in the years to come. Perhaps hearing this planted the seed for me to explore the sexuality experiences and conversations happening within families.

Instead of researching and writing a historical book on this topic, I decided to do what comes naturally to me: share the testimonies of other people to serve as a platform for education and raising awareness. I have often stated that sexual abuse cannot effectively be prevented without a thorough examination and understanding of sexuality. I became aware of parent-to-child sexual abuse occurring within families after reading *Push* by Sapphire. While the book was fiction, I knew it was inspired by real life experiences.

The more I told people what I wanted to do professionally, more women and men shared their stories of sexual assault and incest with me. I decided that publishing the experiences of black women who survived sexual violence would get people to take the issue seriously. Friends who shared their stories were comfortable revealing to me what happened to them as children. However, having those stories displayed in print for the public made them feel uneasy – even with changing their identities. Since most of the survivors I knew were given unhealthy and incorrect information about their bodies and sexuality as children, I changed my focus. I decided to write about sexuality and sexual abuse because the myths and unsupportive messages most of them encountered started within their families.

Until people understand what sexuality is and break down the barriers that impede clear communication about this topic, we will not understand it let alone the essence of who we are. For some African Americans this topic can be a source of discomfort to discuss due to our history of forced sexual violence and trauma in this country. If we do not understand who we are beyond the sexual stereotypes projected onto us, some of us may never experience living as completely free human beings.

How I Met the Peterson Family

In 2003, I set an intention to interview a family. I asked for volunteers and several months later, individuals from an intergenerational extended family responded to my request. I was fortunate enough to gain the trust of these individuals after explaining the purpose of the interviews and the reason I wanted to write a book on this topic. Some members declined to speak with me even though their true identity would be kept confidential.

Interviews began in December of 2003 and ended in June of 2005. Everyone signed a release form granting consent to publish their comments. Speaking with family members about sexuality made it easier for them to talk about sexual abuse. I intentionally structured the interviews so the questions about sexuality came before the questions about abuse. Some of the family members articulated opinions about sexuality in society with more ease than the messages they learned within their own families.

Who Are the Petersons?

The Peterson family is from Memphis, Tennessee. Within this family are four adult children: Mrs. Cole, Mrs. Walker, Mrs. Ryan and Mr. Peterson. Each of these siblings has their own immediate family. Their parents, Mama and Papa Peterson, are deceased. However, Mama Peterson was living at the time interviews were conducted. The Peterson siblings all have their own children and some have grandchildren. I chose to only interview adults 21 years of age and older due to the nature of the topic. The Peterson siblings and most of their adult children reside in Memphis. Attention is given to the socio-economic status and education level of the Peterson family to show their diversity. (See Peterson Family Tree and Bios.)

How the Book is Structured

This book is divided into two sections. Part one, focuses on the questions I asked the Peterson family about sexuality. Part two, focuses on the questions I asked them about sexual abuse. After each immediate family's answers, I offer summaries, insights and new commentary for this second edition. An expanded resource section at the end of the book offers a wealth of information as well as an excerpt from the new stage play, *Hush Hush*.

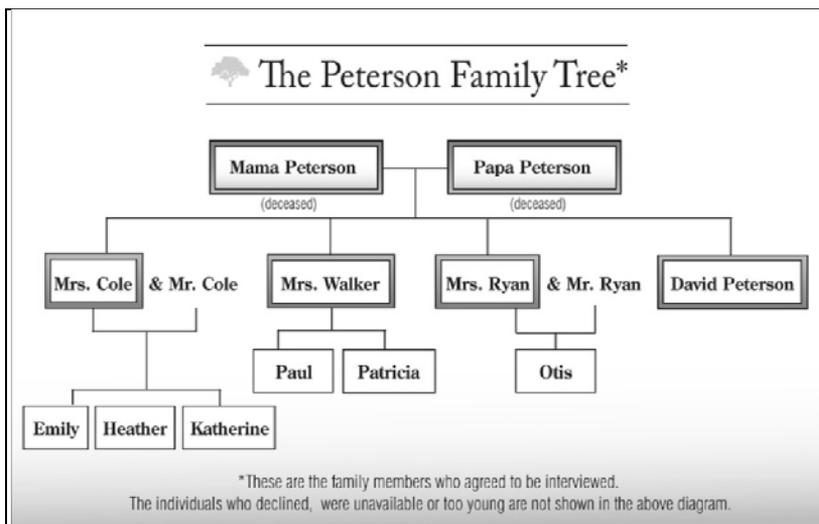
Most of the examples of sexual abuse mentioned in the text are referring to young people under the age of 18. I use the terms sexual violence, sexual abuse and sexual assault interchangeably. When I refer to child sexual abuse, I am specifically referring to young people under the age of 18. While

the Peterson family is African American, I use this label and Black interchangeably. I believe a variety of people of African descent in the diaspora and beyond will relate to some of the challenges and issues raised in this book. It is my hope that as people read the Peterson family's stories, they will be inspired to begin having honest conversations about sexuality and commit to take an active role in preventing sexual abuse within their families and communities.

The ancestors say, "If a child falls, he looks forward. If an elder falls, she looks back". The ancestors say, "Let us look back so we can go forward."

~ Yoruba Proverb

Peterson Family Tree and Bios



Peterson Family Bios**

The Coles are a middle class family living in the suburbs outside of Memphis. The Cole parents have been married over 40 years, and have three daughters.

- Mrs. Cole, is in her 60s, a high school graduate and a retired business woman.

** The names, geographical location and personal occupations of the family members have been changed in order to protect their identity. An equivalent occupation based on income level was substituted. However, their gender, age, familial relations, education level, socio-economic status and personal testimonies are true.

- Mr. Cole, is in his 60s, a college graduate and recently retired from a career in hotel management.
- Emily, the oldest daughter, is in her 40s and divorced with no children. She is a college graduate, residing on the West Coast and works in the public service sector.
- Heather, the middle daughter, is in her 30s and single with no children. She is a college graduate and works for a not for profit organization.
- Katherine, the youngest daughter, is in her 30s and single with no children. She is a college graduate and currently works as a school social worker.

The Walkers live in the city of Memphis. They are a working class family with a son and daughter. Mrs. Walker's ex-husband declined to be interviewed.

- Mrs. Walker, is in her 50s, divorced, a high school graduate and works for a hospital.
- Paul, the oldest, is in his 30s. He is a high school graduate, self-employed, single and has two daughters.
- Patricia, the youngest, is in her 20s. She is a full-time undergraduate college student, single and has one son.

The Ryans are a working class family who live in a suburb outside of Memphis. The Ryan parents are retired and have been married for more than 30 years. They have three sons. One son declined to participate in the interview and the other could not be reached.

- Mrs. Ryan, is in her 60s, a high school graduate and retired from working as an office manager.
- Mr. Ryan, is in his 60s, a high school graduate and retired from construction work.
- Otis, the oldest son, is in his 30s. He is a high school graduate, works at a restaurant and is married with a son and daughter.

David Peterson is in his 40s and the youngest of his siblings in the Peterson family. He is a high school graduate who lives with relatives in the city of Memphis. Currently, Mr. Peterson is unemployed and separated from his wife. They have three young children: two daughters and a son. Due to their personal circumstances, I did not attempt to contact his wife.

PART ONE

Sexuality



Sexuality Overview

The World Health Organization (WHO) gives us the following operational definition of sexuality:

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses: *sex, gender, identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy & reproduction.* Sexuality is experienced and expressed in: *thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles & relationships.* While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of: *biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, logical, historical and religious & spiritual factors.*¹

The results of our upbringing and what we take in from the external world around us helps to create our narratives. Our sexuality narratives include history and stories that support our views of why we believe what we believe. In a narrative, what one believes is based on their retelling of an event. The telling of an event is subjective. Several people can observe or experience a single event but the retelling of what happened can develop into a narrative that varies from person to person.

As African Americans, it is important to investigate the origins of our sexuality narratives as well as who historically and presently has the power to control them. Some families live

out the legacy of harmful sexuality narratives by generating more pain because they have not healed. Other families who are conscious of historical wounds use these same narratives as proof of our resiliency. They chose to end the cycle of shame and violence by advocating for ways of living that promote individual and communal wellbeing. Fortunately, new narratives are being shaped and created within African American communities by amazing sexuality professionals, healers and everyday people who invite us to claim and embrace our sexual selves from a place of empowerment instead of fear.

In order to release shame based narratives we have to discover what the lies are. What do we need to let go of? What is not rooted in truth? These questions were explored when I received funding in 2011 to implement ILERA's yearlong Interfaith Sexuality Discussion Series. The questions I asked religious practitioners, scholars and attendees for the series and subsequent Spirituality & Sexuality Meetups, grew from the seeds planted almost 12 years ago.

When I began questioning members of the Peterson family about their beliefs, they helped me understand how our sexuality narratives are formed. The experiences that shape narratives can be summed up in three categories:

- 1) Verbal Programming
- 2) Modeling (*or modelling*)
- 3) Transformative Incidents

Verbal programming consists of words we read, words we hear spoken, as well as uncomfortable or enforced silence. Modeling involves the actions and behaviors we observe from others and how we in turn imitate or copy those behaviors. This is typically strong in a child or young person's development. Observing what peers and adults do or do not do sends a message. Transformative incidents are experiences that leave an individual or person changed as a result of what they have gone through. You are no longer who you used to be. The effect of a transformative incident can be life promoting or life negating.

Before we began discussing sexual abuse, I learned some of the Peterson family's experiences that shaped their current sexuality narrative. The areas I was most interested in learning about pertained to: 1) how sexuality was talked about growing up in their family 2) what impact they believed society had on sexuality and 3) their beliefs about what children should be taught about sexuality.