

By Mary L. Datcher

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Words are powerful. They hold meaning when they are written — they make impact when they are spoken. The strength of our words, when combined, can be volcanic and either build up or tear down.

Nikki Giovanni discovered at a young age how powerful words can be, transfixed into the world of reading books to pass the time. There was no cable television, nor did she have the convenience of communicating through social media. As she read the words of other celebrated authors, she became enraptured into penning her own words.

The four-time NAACP Image Award recipient recently visited the *Chicago Defender*, where she shared some insight to her incredible career as one of our most influential and prolific American authors. Giovanni was in town to perform in the latest Morris Gandy production, a tribute celebrating the critically acclaimed literary works of Chicagoan Oscar Brown Jr.

Although Giovanni had no close ties with Brown she greatly admired his work and happily accepted the invitation to pay respects and celebrate his legacy with a recent appearance at The Promontory a few weeks ago.

Known for her revolutionary style of poetry and rising in the 1960s, becoming a familiar face throughout the Civil Rights movement has played out like a rerun of circumstances — same storyline but different actors.

"My generation saw a lot of people be killed. Be lynched, be beaten — a lot of awful things happen. We could take some still photos, but now the kids tweet and Facebook. When you're doing something now, the kids know it right away."

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Giovanni went to Cincinnati to stay with her grandparents when she was in 7th grade. They moved to Nashville when she entered high school.

The 73-year-old poet and author recalls her upbringing. "I grew up in the Baptist church. My grandparents were Baptist but my mother was A.M.E. So both of them are going to give you some position so when you grow up, you are standing up doing something," she said. "They would tell me 'We need to take this poetry to the church and to the bookstores.'"

A grandfather was an alumnus of Fisk University, where she landed, dropping out for a short spell and then encouraged to come back by the dean. Later, she earned her Bachelor of Arts de-

Nikki Giovanni: The Revolution is Now Streamed



Nikki Giovanni has won four NAACP Image Awards. (Photo by Mary L. Datcher)

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gree at Fisk.

"A lot of people criticize my generation. We marched in Selma, they criticized us but we said we have to do something."

Admires Black Lives Matter

Today's resurgence of social justice through demonstrations, protests and marches have sparked many memories that gradually pushed her to the frontlines of the human-rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Her admiration for the Black Lives Matter group brings a smile to her face.

"As a Black woman, I am incredibly proud because I never had a daughter, but if I had a daughter, I'll like to feel that one of the founders would be mine. I had a son. But you want to feel like our daughters are now taking over where we were because of Black Lives Matter," Giovanni says, "It does matter. It's not hard to say or understand. My generation had the Black Panthers because the men had taken over. So the women had taken a step up — where is it going to go? I don't know. I'm not afraid of dying, but I hope that I get a chance to see where Black Lives Matter take the world."

In the last three years, the string of events revealing to the world what most Black people had known for hundreds of years on American soil — we are not considered equal to our white counterparts. The revolution is being broadcast, but not on an 18-inch black-and-white television — it's on handheld mobile devices streaming live around the world.

When the country reeled from the murder of Trayvon Martin, to Sandra Bland's sudden death while in police custody, to the three reported murders within a week (Antwun Schumpert, Philando Castile and Alton Sterling)

— sending another wave of nationwide protests to the streets — it brought back hard memories to Giovanni.

She said, "These youngsters are not of our generation. I want them to know what is happening — I want them to know the history. But we can't tell them this is what they should be doing now. They are not dumb and they are not blind. They are going to look at the world a different way — as with our parents. When we started to 'sit in,' all of our parents were upset. This is not the way that we should do it."

Growing up in the Jim Crow South, it was different times where Blacks were called "colored" and lines and signs were visibly displayed to segregate the groups. She says the elders were used to segregation. "They would say, 'It'll be alright' and we would say, 'This is not alright!' Emmett Till had an awful lot to do with us saying, 'Enough, it has to stop!'"

She remembers the similarities — a different time but the same story. "Many people didn't like it. The conservative negroes — God in heaven you get sick of them. If you're going to be a prostitute, stand on a corner," she laughs.

Currently, Giovanni has served on the faculty staff at Virginia Tech as University Distinguished Professor since 1987. A wine connoisseur, who prides herself on her vineyard, she has followed her passion effortlessly.

Giovanni is the author of numerous children's books and poetry collections, including *Chasing Utopia: A Hybrid* (William Morrow, 2013), *Bicycles: Love Poems* (William Morrow, 2009); *Acolytes* (HarperCollins, 2007); *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni: 1968-1998* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2003); *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not-Quite Poems* (William Morrow, 2002); *Blues For All the Changes: New Poems* (William Morrow, 1999); *Love Poems* (William Morrow, 1997); and *Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni* (University Press of Mississippi, 1996). In her first two collections, *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* (Harper Perennial, 1968) and *Black Judgement* (Broadside Press, 1969), Giovanni reflects on the African-American identity.

"I'm from the era of Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker. I'm the generation that is happy, sane and I'm going to eat and I'm going to be warm."

"What is the purpose of the poets? Our job is to remind people that you have to be optimistic. I am an optimist. I'm not friendly. I'm not lonely. You can see how things have gotten better and better. We keep trying to show what we're seeing, and then we show what we hope for."