

## Exclusive Interview with the Notable Emmy-Nominated Actress: Tonya Williams

Written by Patricia Turnier  
Saturday, 12 April 2014 00:00

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Tonya Williams was born in London, England. Her parents are Jamaicans. Her father is a deceased retired judge who used to serve at the Supreme Court for Saint Kitts, British Virgin Islands. Tonya Williams grew up in the Caribbean and she is a half West Indian and half Jamaican. Tonya Williams started ballet at three years old and piano when she was five. Her parents legally separated when she was six. Ms. Williams moved back to England (in Birmingham) with her mother. There she continued to study ballet and piano. In addition, she started studying tap dancing. At the age of 12, she settled down with her mother in Canada. While in high school, she took a modeling course and when it ended, an agent started to represent her for fashion work and TV. After high school, Ms. Williams took a year off and continued to work as a model and actress. She then auditioned and got into Toronto's Ryerson University in the Drama program. One of the policies of the program was that she could not continue to work in the entertainment industry. After one year at Ryerson, Ms. Williams booked the lead role in the play "Love and Politics". In order to be part of it, she left the Drama program

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and the rest was history.

As we all know, Williams started her career almost forty years ago. The public started to recognize her in North America for her role as “the milk girl” in the *Wear a Moustache* milk campaign in the seventies when she was sixteen years old. She also worked as a model in the same decade, appeared in commercials and catalogues for reputable brands such as

*Sears*,  
*Eaton's*  
and  
*The Bay*

. She was a pageant queen. She was crowned Miss Junior Personality and Miss Black Ontario.

After that, she appeared in multiple TV shows such as *Street Legal*, *The Polka Dot Door*, *Boogie!*

(where she danced), and so on. Tonya Williams settled down in L.A. in the mid-eighties and rapidly ended up on popular shows like *Hill Street Blues*

,  
*Matlock*

,  
*Falcon*

, *Crime a Break*, *Generations*. In 2007, she co-starred with Danny Glover in Clement Virgo's movie *Poor Boy's Game*. She worked with Rob Lowe in 2012 on the set of *Imperfect Injustice*. She was in *Empire of Dirt*

which premiered at the 2013  
*Toronto International Film Festival*

. Of course, Ms. Williams is best known for portraying the role of Dr. Winters since 1990 in the soap opera *The Young & the Restless* until 2010.

Dr. Olivia Barber Winters is a physician at Genoa City Memorial Hospital, and a graduate of the University of Colorado Boulder and Georgetown University. She was married to Nathan Hastings, Sr., and then to Malcolm Winters. Ms. Williams became the first actress who played a Black physician in the American television history in a series and probably in North America. In addition, she is the one who played the role of a doctor in television for the

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longest time, which is ground-breaking. Dr. Winters' role defied stereotypes (she was multidimensional: smart, ambitious, beautiful, elegant, etc.). It certainly inspired and resonated with many women all over the world who may not have considered the medical profession as a career in their formative years. When the trailblazing role of Dr. Winters was created, it stirred optimism and pride because it was a new event in TV history. It would be really interesting to have Dr. Winters return to Genoa City in the future and see her become a specialist in a field with still scarcity of females such as radiology, the most lucrative realm for physicians.

In April 2001, Williams took the Canadian entertainment industry by storm, creating the *ReelWorld Film Festival*

[

<http://www.reelworld.ca>

]. Based in Toronto, throughout the years,

*ReelWorld*

became an important and rich (in terms of content) film festival in the national scene as well as internationally - with support from people like Robert Townsend, Eriq LaSalle, etc. Thus, Tonya Williams wears many hats: actress, director, founder/president and executive producer for

*Wilbo Entertainment*

and founder of now defunct

*The Publicity Group*

(which had the purpose to identify and provide

~~opportunities in 1997 and 2002 as~~ founder/president of the abovementioned *ReelWorld Film*

*Festival*

since 2001.

Ms. Williams is an articulate woman. In addition, philanthropy is important to her. She is open-handed and gives back by consulting people, including aspiring actors, about how they can ~~the distantly have a business~~. People can contact her through her official website [www.tonyaleewilliams.com](http://www.tonyaleewilliams.com)

. Ms. Williams regularly speaks to groups across North America about her experiences in the entertainment business. In addition, she mentors over 30 talented young hopefuls. She is a strong political lobbyist, utilising her voice to help modify licensing and government policies. Ms. Williams' ongoing advocacy work in the entertainment industry has been recognized by former Mayor David Miller who appointed her to the Toronto Film Board, which she no longer sits.

Each year, the abovementioned *ReelWorld Film Festival* screens films, provides professional panels and honours people in the industry for their outstanding, granting prizes such as the

*Trailblazer Award*

and the

*Visionary Award*

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. TD Bank Group, NBC Universal, CBC, ACTRA, Telefilm Canada, Cineplex Entertainment LP, Global Toronto are among the main sponsors and partners of the festival.

*ReelWorld Film Festival*

, which will complete soon its 14th year, was usually a 5 day festival – but this year it will have an additional 3 days in the city of Markham, which will partner with Markham's Mayor Scarpitti.

Overall, Tonya Williams has been involved in the entertainment industry since the age of 16. She stands out with her body of work because she played in top shows in the U.S. and Canada.

She made TV guest appearances in *Hill Street Blues* (1981), *Matlock* (1986), *Silk Stalkings* (1991),

*Psi Factor*: *Chronicles of the Paranormal*

(1996), etc. In addition, she made film appearances in

*Spaced Invaders*

(1990),

*The Borrower*

, (1991),

*Seventeen*

(2000), *Double Wedding* (starring twins Tia and Tamara Mowry) (2010) and the list goes on.

Ms. Williams also has been a guest star in *The Bold and Beautiful* in

2011. Aforementioned, she is best known for her role in CBS's

*Young & the Restless*

(created in 1973) as Dr. Olivia Winters, which she started in 1990. The soap opera became the venue that catapulted Ms. Williams to an international audience.

*The Young & the Restless*

is broadcasted daily in several languages in many parts of the world. For instance, the show is called in French

[Les feux de l'amour](#)

.  
*The Young and the Restless*

is the soap opera that I watched the most because I enjoyed the diversity in the casting. The series was truly inclusive. For instance, this is where America and the world actually discovered

[Eva Longoria](#)

in 2001.

Tonya Williams appeared in the 1995 *CBS Soap Break* and in the *Tonya Lee Williams: Gospel Jubilee* that she produced in

2004 for CBC, among other things. She received several distinctions:

*NAACP Image Award*

for Best Daytime Actress in 2000 and 2002,

*Dr. Bird Award*

for outstanding artists of Caribbean ancestry in 2000,

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### Harry Jerome Award

in 2004,

*TV Cases-Red Ribbon of Hope Award*

,  
*Positive Impact Award*

,  
*Daytime Emmy Award*

nominee in 2000 and 2002,

*Association of Black Women Physicians Award*

,  
*Actra Award of Excellence*

(one of the highest Canadian prizes) in 2005,

*Toronto's – Positive Impact Award*

,  
*Howard University's – Legacy of Leadership Award*

,  
*International Women Achievers Award*

and the

*Martin Luther King Jr. Award*

in 2012 bestowed by the

[Black Theatre Workshop](#)

(BTW). Furthermore, she is an

*Oshawa Walk of Fame*

recipient (2007). She was featured in one of the top National Canadian newspapers like

*The Montreal Gazette*

. Articles were written about her in

*Jet*

,  
*Inside Soap*

,  
*Diversity*

, etc. She has been highlighted in

Who's Who in Black Canada

and its website

[www.whoswhoinblackcanada.com](http://www.whoswhoinblackcanada.com)

,  
Who's Who Among African-Americans

,  
*Soap Opera*

, [Soap](#) *Opera Weekly, Toronto Star, Toronto Sun, Flare, Essence, Toronto Life, Hollywood Reporter*, *TV Guide*

, and the list goes on. In 2012, she was included in Canada's Top 25 Immigrants produced by *Canadian Immigrant Magazine*

. Williams is recognized as a Canadian treasure and, as mentioned, she was appointed to the Toronto Film Board among other prestigious positions. On a more personal level, the actress

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married Robert Simpson in 1983. The couple divorced in 1991. Williams currently lives full time in Los Angeles and goes to Toronto for her festival or when her presence is needed for other events. She enjoys long drives and unplanned trips to Europe.

*Tonya Williams was very generous with her time during the following interview. We had the pleasure to speak to her from Quebec last winter. She talked mainly about her professional path and her ReelWorld Film Festival.*

### PATRICIA TURNIER TALKS TO TONYA WILLIAMS:

**P.T.** Who influenced you to become an actress during your youth?

**T.W.** No one really influenced me to become an actress. I remember I loved tales as a child. Even as a baby, there was never a night when someone did not read me a bedtime story. This was my favourite part of the day. Later in school, history represented my favorite subject, and I loved to envision and visualize these stories as if I was experiencing it.

My mother noticed that when I watched TV, I was engrossed in it – if she called me I wouldn't even hear her – I was fascinated with the lighting and costumes. I was not as drawn to the characters themselves but to the stories. I was not captivated by the individuals with the glamour but I was enticed into the global aspects of the shows. At the time I was not aware that people were doing a job. Even though I started working in the industry when I was 16 years old, it wasn't until I was 19 that I considered it as something I would do for a career. Up until that time I just thought of it as something fun I liked to do – but at 19 years old I auditioned and was accepted into the Drama Program at Ryerson. That's when I really realized how much work this acting requires. Growing up, I was always involved in the arts of some kind. I took ballet, piano, tap dancing, violin as extracurricular activities. As with most Jamaican parents, mine thought it was important to expose me to all kinds of experiences. So, my home environment encouraged my interests in all things educational.

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**P.T.** There is a sub-question which came into my mind: were you free to pick up whatever professions you wanted or was there some kind of influence to choose a liberal profession?

**T.W.** When my Mother was younger, there were very few opportunities for females. Most women became secretaries, teachers or nurses. My Mother definitely knew she didn't want to be a secretary or a teacher. So, she went to England and pursued nursing. It was very important to my Mother that I find my interests and pursue what I wanted – since she didn't have that opportunity she made sure I did.

My parents divorced when I was 5 and I feel I was free to choose the career that would make me happy. However, I believe that if my father – who was a barrister and then later a Supreme Court Justice – had been an integral part of my life, I mean being with me on a daily basis, maybe the path of my career would have been different. My dad did not have a choice when he was growing up and, perhaps, I would have felt the same. My paternal grandmother told him he had to be a physician or a lawyer. So, my father was more restrictive about the choices of children. I carry no memories of my mother telling me what I had to do with my life; she emphasized that being a good person, being productive and happy were the key ingredients to live.

As a child I never thought of acting at all as a career....every week I wished to be something different [chuckles]. If I read an Agatha Christie book, I wanted to be a detective, like Miss Marple, to solve murder mysteries and so on [laughs]. I remember I aspired to be a scientist after reading Frankenstein. I wanted to be a tennis player when I saw Arthur Ashe, I fancied becoming a race car driver, because I loved driving too fast! In this regard, I was like any other child...I was very much a dreamer.

**P.T.** Earlier, you spoke about freedom. Do you know who else among the celebrities of the Jamaican community raised her son in a free way?

**T.W.** Who?

**P.T.** [Grace Jones](#). I heard her once in an interview where she said she never used the word “can’t” when she raised her son. It was not part of her vocabulary.

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**T.W.** □ How interesting! However, my mother and Grace Jones are probably as opposite as you can get [chuckles]. My Mother is very traditional, and believe me she used the word can't all the time! – but she wanted me to be a well-grounded child, to know about the world and never to feel limited in my pursuit of a full life. She allowed me to be free in some areas. For instance, when I was 14 and with her at a classical concert, I told her I'd love to know how to play the violin...two weeks later she presented me with this instrument and had me signed up for classes...that was very much my Mother. But, if it was just frivolous things like clothes and parties, she made sure that my head wasn't obsessed with these trivial things – that being smart was always better than being pretty.

When I was 17, my high school organised a trip to Paris. For my mother, this was something worthwhile – so while many of my other friends' parents wouldn't pay the money for this, my Mother would sacrifice for it, since to her this was very important. She knew this opportunity would open my mind to the world. This experience was priceless for my learning and my growth. Every child is different and unique. My mother knew my strengths and weaknesses. She could see my nature and guided me. She knew how to bring out the best in me. She encouraged me to be involved in what interested me and got me excited. That made me more productive. She never forced things on me and I believe it was the perfect way to educate me. This might not work for all children – but she knew this was the right way for me.

**P.T.** □ **When did you realize that you had the skills to become an actress?**

**T.W.** When I was 16, my mother signed me up for a modeling course, not to become a mannequin, but as a young lady, she thought it best I went to a kind of finishing school, and this was the greatest way – to learn how to walk properly, understand fashion, how to take care of my skin, etc. It opened my eyes to how easy it was to bring out the best physically in ourselves while camouflaging our physical weaknesses. The woman who ran the courses was called Judy Welch. She also had an Acting and Modeling Agency. When the course was finished, she asked my mother if she could send me to auditions because she saw potential. My Mom said that if it didn't interfere with my school work and if it was something I wanted to do, she would support that. So, from time to time, I had modeling gigs for *Sears, Eaton's or The Bay*. I also got involved in TV commercials. I did this for a few years still not thinking it could become a career. When I finished high school and I was 18, I knew one thing: I didn't want to go to university at the time. I wanted to take a year off and just live – enjoy life and figure out what my next steps would be. It was during that year I met my first boyfriend. He was totally committed to acting and the craft of performing. He was interested in classical theatre – and spoke non-stop about Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekov. We poured over drama schools together – ones in England, the USA and



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Canada. During all of this, I was starting to really understand how incredible Acting was. It was his dream to end up on stage, study acting in London, England, etc. He was the lead of a Shakespeare play at the end of high school. The discussions we had, definitely influenced and nurtured me. This became my awakening that it could be a career and a business. We talked about the schools where I might enroll, and this is how I ended up to Ryerson in the late seventies. Most institutions emphasized on the academic aspect of acting, and I didn't want to be part of that. At Ryerson, they focused on the 'doing' of acting with a pragmatic approach. From day one, we were on that stage and in our leotards working professionally, and I believe that is the best way to work the craft of acting. It was like being in a theater company. We studied plays and characters.

Overall, I believe a series of events guided me in the direction where I am now. I definitely believe in destiny. I am also spiritual and religious. I know that there is always a Holly Spirit which is guiding me. I always felt it since my childhood and I know it is still there at the age of 55.

**P.T. I can't believe that you are 55. It makes me think of the popular quote: "Blacks don't crack" [laughs out loud]. This is Black beauty!**

**T.W.** [chuckles].

**P.T. It is interesting to hear you talk about destiny because this morning, when I was thinking about this interview, I thought that *The Young & the Restless* is among the few soaps that remained. So many got cancelled. Fate made you stay in one of the top American soap operas for decades. In fact, *Y&R* is recognized as the number-one rated, longest running daytime drama in American history.**

**T.W.** Absolutely! Moreover, if I hadn't met my boyfriend, I probably would not have taken that road. So, in my case there was not really a specific moment that made me realize I had to become an actress. It was more a combination of factors. I guess I was lucky because I didn't have a career plan. I focused on the present most of the time and it served me well. In this regard, I reiterate there was not a specific moment that made me think my destiny would be to become an actress. There is a saying that goes like this: " *If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans* ".

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**P.T. You probably met naysayers during your pathway, what gave you strength not to be deterred by them?**

**T.W.** Fortunately, what people say to me does not impact me either way – whether the comments are negative or positive. In my opinion, everyone has a perspective. I think it's important for people to express their views but I just don't believe it's that significant for the people listening to take them to heart...even if the comment is a compliment – does it matter? It's only important that you continue to do what you know is right for you – and the opinions of others on this matter are not relevant.

I don't see my career as an actress like my entire identity. Acting only represents a piece of a pie of my journey on this earth. So, having this viewpoint definitely helped me to focus on what is important. My career and other people's opinions do not define me.

I am paid well, but people tend to forget that a huge part of what I undertake does not bring me money, like going to auditions, which is work in itself. In addition, as an actor you prepare more than most people do for a job interview. We receive tons of pages of dialogues that we have to learn, memorise, and perform. In other words, we need to understand the role, prepare ourselves, be at ease with the character we are portraying and deliver a performance.

Part of the job for us as actors is to invest a lot of money in ourselves – even submitting our auditions requires us to pay for our tape auditions which are then sent to the casting directors who request them. It's also part of our work to be in contact with casting directors, producers, directors, agents – networking is a vital part of this entertainment industry. It can be exhausting. I need to be aware on a regular basis of what projects are out there which require research, and so on.

**P.T. I am also sure that your morals played an important part with your choices for future roles.**

**T.W.** Absolutely! It is really interesting that you are bringing this up because it represents a very relevant question to me. It symbolizes a dilemma that I have been struggling with during

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the last five years. When my career started to take off in the late seventies and early eighties, it was much easier for me to set limits. It was clear to me that I would not do nudity, and so on. When you watched the shows at the time, like *Good Times*, the *Brady Bunch*, etc., morals were not an issue compared to now. The standards were different back then. Now, we see a lot of work with morally poor content. So, I love your question because there is a lot of stuff out there that I decided not to go for, and this decision shortened my options. This means that I might need to change direction professionally in the future. It happens that I receive scripts where I would have to portray questionable characters. I have to turn them down. It also happened that I was more drawn to other parts in scripts, even if they were smaller. I like to focus more on quality, which continues to be a very important factor for me. Nevertheless, I have to admit that it does not always make it an easy choice because it is great to be the lead in a show, for instance. However, it is more crucial to me to respect my principles.



**TONYA LEE WILLIAMS**

**P.T.□ Who developed the trailblazing role of Dr. Olivia Winters M.D.?**

**T.W.□** This is an interesting question. There is definitely a story behind this. I would say it was a kind of collaboration. Originally, I had to audition for [Drucilla](#). I did a terrible audition because I didn't like the role at all. She was an illiterate young woman and a runaway on the street and so on with all the stereotypes.

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Honestly, I said to my agent that I didn't want to go to the audition. She encouraged me to because there could be an opportunity for me to be noticed for another role. I didn't rehearse for the audition and I didn't make Drucilla appear like she was illiterate. I made her sound smart. This caught the attention of Bill Bell, the creator of *The Young & the Restless*. I was shocked when my agent told me I got a call back for the show. I learned that they wanted to see me for another role, where I would play, Dr. Winters, a bright and professional physician. I loved hearing this and I went back.

This is how I got the gig. Years later, I asked Bill Bell why he chose me for Olivia because I was curious to know what he saw. He responded that when I auditioned for Drucilla, the Dr. Winters' character didn't exist. At that moment, he envisioned me playing a physician and realised the need to create this role, which would be the antithesis of Drucilla. Dr. Winters is incredibly academic.

**P.T. It is fascinating to hear the behind the scene story!**

**T.W.** As you can see, the creation of Dr. Winters is a combination of what I wanted her to be and Bill Bell's vision. He had great instincts to create a Black family with its dynamic at the right time. It blew the minds of everybody. I believe that if it had happened ten years later, it would have been too late.

**P.T. Do you know which American soap opera first introduced a Black family?**

**T.W.** *Generations* became the first soap opera to introduce an African-American family since its beginning, but I believe that no other soap opera did it the same way as Bill Bell. There were characters and couples in other soaps, but nothing beyond. No one ever put together at that level, an African-American family with developed roles and storylines. There were two Black families, the Barbers and Winters. Black persons were never put on the map before in daytime series like in *Y&R*. These characters became colorless with time for the mainstream and were their favorite fictional personas. It was a twelve-year beautiful odyssey from 1990 until 2002, where we were the most significant African-American family in daytime television. It was the golden age. Bill Bell had a dream to create something unheard of, and I was privileged to be part of that. It was magical like the sitcom

[Friends](#)

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. There was something special and different. The cast was a oneness in real life, and this was palpable in the situation comedy. Nobody since then has been able to replicate this level of magnetism between six people. I feel the same way about

*Y&R*

. Having

[Shemar](#)

,

[Victoria](#)

, Kristoff, Veronica (who played Aunt Mamie, the first regular African-American character in the show), Nathan (Purdee), and myself was fairylike. It represented a moment of pure ecstasy [chuckles]. To be honest, I can't quite explain it. Like

*Friends*

, it didn't duplicate. We saw the same magic in

[The Cosby Show](#)

which was never replicated in other sitcoms. Maybe because it is about novelty and freshness, the recreation is never the same.

**P.T. It was amazing for the viewers to see African-American fictional and multi-layered characters portraying people with a wide range of careers. Neil Winters was a businessman working in Corporate America with a prestigious pedigree, a Stanford MBA graduate. Your character was a physician; Drucilla became more polished and refined. She was a model and a ballerina, [Malcolm](#) was a professional photographer, Nathan was a private detective and the list goes on. This was unseen in any other television series and helped to redefine more extensively the portrayal of African-Americans.**

**T.W.** Absolutely!

**P.T. What does it mean to you to be probably the first Black woman who played a physician<sup>1</sup> in North America's television landscape for a series? In addition, you are the only actor who played a doctor for over twenty years on screen in North America and, maybe, in the world. Was it a conscious decision you made from the start in your career to choose constructive roles? Also, were you influenced in your squads by the fact that you came from an intellectual family (you are the daughter of a judge and a registered nurse)?**

**T.W.** Wow! I didn't realize I was the first, thanks for telling me. There are several elements in your question. First of all, I strongly believe that my choices in roles were influenced about how I was raised by my parents. They had an impact on the way I saw the world. [Silence] My

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parents are thoughtful and intelligent people. The discussions I had with them and their conversations I heard with their friends definitely shaped me since my formative years.

I have been fortunate to have parents who always backed me up. In other words, a support net was accessible to me. This gave me the strength to go for what I was passionate about and not make poor choices. I met struggling actors who are completely on their own; this creates additional stress and can negatively impact their careers. Bad decisions may lead them to portray weak characters.

Landing the role of Dr. Winters is not something that I perceive like winning the Gold medal. I see it more like a marathon or a journey where I put one foot after another while being open to the destination where fate will take me. I feel great about my career as a whole. I respect and I think it is great if portraying Dr. Winters influenced positively a viewer to become a physician, to embrace any philanthropic work or to help them any other way.

Overall, I think the glory goes to God. I believe that he directs us in specific paths. I think that all of us are the first of something. For any actors, I think it is important to like the character that you are portraying otherwise you won't do a good job. You have to get into the skin of the persona, so it is important to have an interest in the role. This is what works for me. Consequently, I definitely enjoyed playing Dr. Winters for many years.

**P.T. What are the similarities and differences between you and Dr. Winters?**

**T.W.** One of the similarities is we are Black [Laughs out loud]. Both of us are mediators and diplomats. We find solutions that do not require conflicts. We avoid as much as possible hostile situations. We always try to attain common grounds and we are well-mannered. Both of us are self-contained. That is about it for similarities. The physician is very structured and disciplined. This is the opposite of me [chuckles]. This is what I loved about playing a character. I can pretend to be somebody that I am not.

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Dr. Winters is a very constrained, she sees less choices in her world. I am more open to possibilities – I tend to overthink things, I look at them from every angle. Dr. Winters saw things in a more black and white reality. She views the world from the perspective of her training as a doctor – meaning if you can't observe it, it's not real...I'm a person who believes that a lot of what we cannot see or understand is also valuable.

Overall, Dr. Winters is a very rational, methodical and logical woman. I have more of an artistic side. Dr. Winters is much grounded and has common sense. I can describe her as a concise and clear thinker. Assertiveness is also part of her personal traits. Dr. Williams is multidimensional and I believe I have this trait. I have interests in many realms and probably more than Dr. Winters. I cannot be put easily in a box. In my opinion, Dr. Winters would be less comfortable than me to be out of her comfort zone. The unknown doesn't scare me, I am open to try new things and take risks. Therefore, I consider myself a free person who is beyond categories. I would not be quick to say the same about Dr. Winters given that she has a Cartesian mindset and is more conservative in her choices.

**P.T. When you talk about taking risks, this is what you did when you auditioned for the role of Drucilla. In some ways, you interpreted the character differently and you ended up with the new role of Dr. Winters.**

**T.W.** Exactly! Again about Olivia's traits and mine, Dr. Winters is more traditional – wanted to be married, have children, etc. For me, it was different, I never thought that much about getting married and when I did, I was not very good at it – I find it hard to live with people – I love being alone, it is my favourite thing in the world...not a good characteristic for a marriage. Olivia has a child. I've never really thought about having children. I remember when I was 18 years old, friends were speaking about how much they wanted to be married and have children; I remember saying, I'd rather not be married and adopt. I'm now 55 years old and still don't think I'm ready!

I always did my own make-up for Dr. Winters. It helped me get into her character, her make-up is different from mine which is more subtle. In fact, I don't like to wear cosmetics at all. Dr. Winters has make-up in any settings. Her attires are different than mine. She has heels, skirts, suits and jackets. I love loose comfortable clothing and flat shoes...I'm the queen of flat comfortable shoes! All of this makes my walk different in terms of how I carry myself when I portray her character. Kristoff St. John (who plays Neil Winters) noticed that. I feel confined and restricted when I have her clothes. It is also part of her persona.

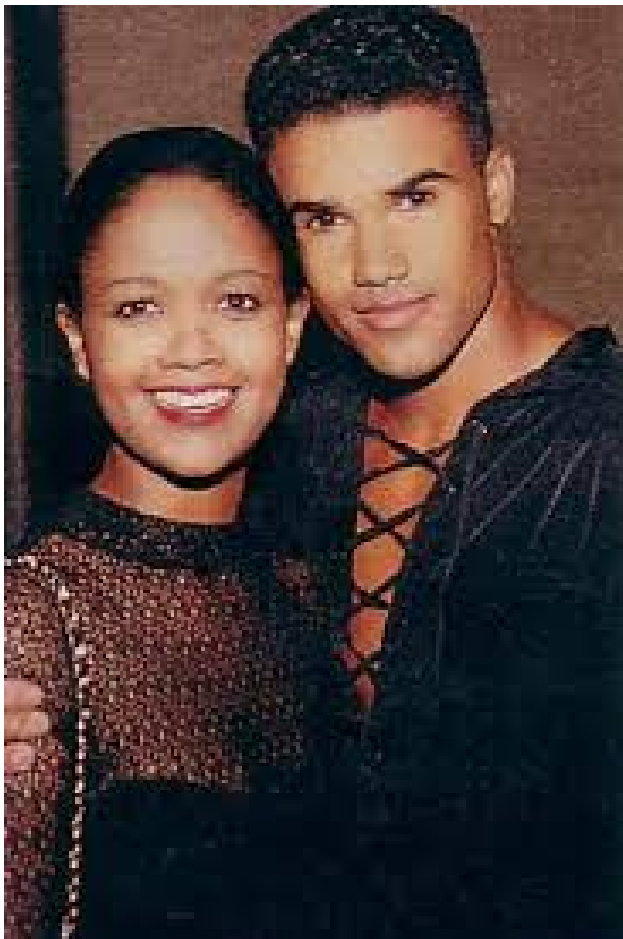
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**P.T.** Earlier, you mentioned that Dr. Winters had a son and was married. I think it was really interesting and important to show on TV a highly educated beautiful Black woman who had her family. It broke stereotypes because these women exist. My own mother is one of them.

**T.W.** This is true, these females exist and my mom is another concrete example also. I would like to add that Dr. Winters is more social than me. I feel good being by myself and I don't think that Dr. Winters would have the same sentiments if she was placed in this situation. She would feel lonely. In addition, I am used to be by myself. I am an only child compared to her.



**P.T.** Studies demonstrated that people can be influenced by what they see, hear, and read in the media. Did you receive interesting testimonies of women and those from “minorities” who shared with you throughout the years that your role influenced them to become a physician?

**T.W.** Yes, I received tons of mails not only about women who became physicians, but also



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females in general. Sometimes, I get correspondence from women who live in countries where females have limited rights. They shared with me that Dr. Winters broadens to them what was possible for women to accomplish.

There is an organization called the *Association of Black Women Physicians Award*, which granted me an award. They told me that after the introduction of my character on TV, an increase in the medical faculties was noticed in the country.

**P.T.** The same phenomenon happened when shows like [A Different World](#) were around. There was an increase of admissions in HBCUs. When *Top Gun* became a blockbuster, there was a rise of admittances in the American air force in the eighties. The media influence people.

**T.W.** Absolutely! However, some people tend to forget that soap operas are based on fantasies. Being a physician is serious hard work. I hope that some young females didn't decide to become a doctor because they expected to end up with a character like Malcolm.

**P.T.** [Laughs out loud]

**T.W.** [Laughs] This definitively cannot be the main motivating factor to become a physician. It would be disturbing. They cannot focus only on the positive side; they need to have a nuanced perception of what it really means to embrace the medical profession. There are viewers who really get caught up in the lifestyles of our characters. They think that we look as top models when we wake up in the morning, just like in the show. Some are surprised to see me at the grocery stores not looking very Olivia at all.

As mentioned, my mother is a retired registered nurse. She was excellent in her profession and was trained in the fifties. She often said to me that in her time, being a nurse was a calling. Now, she feels it is so different and some nurses are terrible when she goes in the hospital. It happened to me that I saw health professionals who are looking at the clock because they can't wait to leave the hospital. Some look miserable. So, when someone chooses to be in the health field it is really important to do it for the right reasons because it is not an easy job. Their decision cannot be based on some fantasies they saw on television.

## Exclusive Interview with the Notable Emmy-Nominated Actress: Tonya Williams

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I can share something which has nothing to do with my character on *Y&R*. Years ago, I met once a young boy (who was a fan) in Jamaica. I gave him some advice at the time. I don't even remember what I said. I think I told him something like 'pursue your dreams and never give up'. Fifteen years later, in Toronto, a young man came up to me at an event. He said: "I am someone you met in Jamaica when I was a boy on the street with no future ahead of me". He added that I told him something positive, and that stayed with him. Later, a series of opportunities manifested in his life. He ended up in Switzerland because there was a program for "Third World" countries. He was chosen. At the time, he was working for the justice department in Toronto. Unbelievable! It's amazing how our words can affect someone in such positive ways.

Sometimes I said things that I didn't really remembered and those words had an impact on other people. The same phenomenon happened to me throughout my life on several degrees. Randomly, some individuals said things to me that were specific to what I was going through at the time. I believe God used them as a vessel to get through me. There are people who almost committed suicide and a song or words pronounced by a commentator on radio and so on might have an influence on them. In this regard, they will decide not to put an end to their life. So, I believe it does not matter who has a positive impact on others, it is God's work that uses human beings to send messages.



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**P.T. How did the *ReelWorld Film Festival* come to fruition? In other words, what is the history behind it?**

**T.W.** Since I was 17, I started to go to film festivals, where you meet like-minded people who are passionate about stories, movies, and so on. They come from different realms: special effects, wardrobes, screenwriting, acting, hairstyling, casting, etc. It is a wonderful world. I really enjoyed the conversations I was having with the people at these events. Later on, many people reached out to me to get information about how they could be successful in the industry. I realised that, instead of talking to people one by one, I should rather create a constructive initiative (with the collaboration of other experienced, established, and successful individuals in the business) accessible to a larger public. This is really how my festival started. I strongly believe that festivals are among the most fertile platforms. I wanted my medium to seek for multiple communities: Natives, Asians, Africans, etc. We provide information about how to navigate in the industry with their differences. I started to think about all this in 1999, and the festival came into fruition in 2001.

We want to present a more realistic outlook of different communities. None are monolithic; they have variations, and it is important to showcase different perspectives. We favor eclecticism and heterogeneity. Before I founded the festival, I knew that many voices needed to be heard and shown as authentically as possible. So, *ReelWorld* constitutes all these attributes.

**P.T. Talk to us about your festival's mission and its achievements, including the year round professional development that it provided.**

**T.W.** Our mission is to showcase the work of multiple communities (Aboriginal, Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern and South Asian), or materials that cover themes related to these groups with non-stereotypical content. So, *ReelWorld's* main mandate is to create opportunities for racially diverse and talented artists. We also want to give information on many levels: how to create a script and develop stories, how to mount a documentary, how to pitch your movie to get financings, how to proceed with distributions, how to market your work, how to study your market, where to get funds (through crowd funding sites such as Kickstarter), how to protect your artistic vision, how to cast and make a grew crew selection, etc. To accomplish this, we bring in veterans from the entertainment industry.

We also offer *ReelWorld Travels*, which provides free screenings to community groups and high schools in the Greater Toronto Area and Golden Horseshoe Area. We partnered with

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ACTRA-Toronto's *YEAA Group* to start short films created by young actors who portray individuals under the age of 30. We created *Industry Networking* that is addressed to professionals in the entertainment business who want to work together and/or share information with one another.

Annually, we have panels. For instance, in the past, the Writers Guild of Canada (WGC) screenwriters shared how to get into the writers' room and how to collaborate with other writers, the show runner, and the broadcaster to create a compelling TV series. Furthermore, *The ReelWorld Visionary Award* recognizes individuals who have made a significant impact on the Canadian entertainment industry by opening doors to others and creating lasting change. Past recipients of the *ReelWorld Visionary Award* comprise: Arnold Auguste, Cameron Bailey, Helen Paul, Joan Jenkinson, Fil Fraser, Patricia and Moses Mawa, and Alice Shih.

Each year, we give to 20 emerging and racially diverse artists ( [E20s](#) ) a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. At September's *Indie Film Lounge*, we introduce them to more than 200 industry experts: producers, directors, agents, etc. We support them to create lifelong, career-making relationships with people who are in the position to make decisions in Northern American film and television. So, *The Indie Film Lounge* constitutes an immersive mentorship and professional development experience.

**P.T. Your festival is primarily about diversity. It concerns ethno-cultural communities who need their voice to be heard. Can you elaborate on the hurdles they are meeting and their contributions in the film, including the music industry?**

**T.W.** We definitely focus solely on racial diversity. The main hurdles are about getting the support for material work that is not considered mainstream. This is the reality in the film and music industries. A lot of networking is required. You can have a jewel in your hands, but if people do not know about it, you won't get anywhere. The barriers are diverse. Some lack assurance, others have the sentiment that they do not really belong. In that regard, it is part of our mission to build confidence in multiple ways by making sure our festival is really inclusive. This is another element I can add to your prior question. I would like to say that in the entertainment industry, we do not have enough people of colour in 'greenlight' positions – individuals at the top who have the ability to approve a project or finance it.

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Again regarding inclusiveness, in our festival, we do not have VIPs, and this prevents to create unnecessary hierarchies. It is not the spirit of our festival and certainly not the message we want to convey. At *ReelWorld*, there are no irrelevant or stupid questions during panels, etc. We truly want to set up a warm and welcoming environment. It has to be an oasis for the participants. The emerging filmmakers and the other artists know, or will discover, that they won't be put down or belittled in any way. This aspect is really important to me, and I believe we achieved that since the foundation of the festival. In terms of contributions, the participants who come from many parts of the world offer different perspectives with another understanding of the world. It is enriching for the public to discover new sounds, different customs and traditions.

**P.T. What are the main criteria (with the annual deadline(s)) to submit materials for the *ReelWorld Film Festival***

**? What about the idioms? Can people all over the world submit their work with English and/or French subtitles since your festival is based in Canada?**

**T.W.** The products we accept have to be from or about racially diverse communities. If the film is in a foreign language, we need English subtitles. We welcome worldwide movies and other products (music videos...) – but we are more interested in Canadian filmmakers.

Each spring our festival promotes, encourages and shows more than 65 dramatic features, documentaries, shorts and music videos with a variety of perspectives from emerging and established artists. We accept Canadian and International submissions that feature the aforementioned communities in prominent roles in film/video content and/or have been created/produced/directed by these groups. Usually, we showcase more than 60% Canadian content (this year it will be 70%). These categories are considered: feature narratives, short narratives, animations, feature documentaries, short documentaries, children's programming, music videos, experimental films and student films. We also offer competition categories. For more information, the public can browse our website.

I want to add that there is no submission limit for the number of entries to *ReelWorld Film Festival*. However, a separate subscription form, a complete submission package and a separate entry fee are required. All the information is available at [www.reelworld.ca](http://www.reelworld.ca)

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### **P.T. What can the audience expect this year from your festival?**

**T.W.** First of all, I would like people to know that the *ReelWorld Film Festival* will occur from April 2nd through the 6th in Toronto and from April 11th until the 13th in Markham (a city in Ontario). We will have the screenings of Jeremy Whittaker's *Destiny*, Andrew Chung's *Millions*, Mohammad Ghorbankarimi's *The Desert Fish*, the ACTRA Toronto's *YEAA Shorts* and the primarily Canadian shorts program titled *Identity*, *The Rocket* (that became Australia's official selection for the 2014 Oscars) among others.

The 2014 *ReelWorld Film Festival* will present the strongest program in our 14-year history, and the fact that a big part of the content will be Canadian is truly outstanding. More specifically, 79 films and videos with 70 per cent Canadian content will be shown. In addition, we will have industry panels with experts such as Dan Lyon (Telefilm Canada), Ben Joseph (*How to be Indie*), Jennifer Holness (*Home Again*), Laurie Januska (Directors Guild of Canada), Sedina Fiati (ACTRA Toronto Diversity Committee), Larissa Giroux (Canadian Film Centre), Jennifer Blitz (OMDC); Anne Marie Maduri (Maduri Laird), and Marcia Douglas (Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund).

The festival will provide six workshops and networking sessions for aspiring and emerging filmmakers, creating opportunities for 100 meetings with Canadian filmmakers and industry insiders, discussing projects ranging in value from \$5,000 to \$500,000. Mentors and delegates (for instance, Consular Generals from Jamaica, India, China and Cypress) will come from across the country and will travel from as far as the *Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF)*.

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