

Exclusive Interview with the talented American documentarist Crystal Emery

Written by Patricia Turnier
Monday, 10 October 2016 18:29



[Crystal Renée Emery](#) grew up in the Brookside Housing Projects in New Haven, Connecticut. Philanthropy is part of Ms. Emery's family tradition. Thus, her grandmother is a minister, likewise for her mother who is a Yale Divinity School minister. Her family members take care of their community.

During her childhood, [Ms. Emery](#) enjoyed directing her brothers and sisters in plays and imaginary television shows. She is an artist, authoress, documentarist, activist and playwright among other things. The lady is known for creating socially-conscious works and stories that highlight the triumph of the human spirit. Emery is also the CEO & founder of her nonprofit organization URU, The Right to Be, Inc., a content production company that tackles social issues via film, theatre, publishing, and other arts-based initiatives.

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At ten, Emery began having the early-onset symptoms of Charcot-Marie-Tooth, a neuromuscular pathology that was not properly diagnosed until the age of 19. Her health problems did not become a deterrent to the pursuit of her passions. Thus, at 16, she met the well-known playwright Ntozake Shange at the Black Theater Group at Yale's Afro-American Cultural Center. The authoress gave Emery permission to produce a performance of her successful play ([For Colored Girls ...](#)) at a festival for high school students. Emery's production obtained several state and regional awards, giving her a reputation as a respected young actress and directress. Over more than three decades, she produced 20-plus plays and two documentaries. Her work was presented across America and Europe.

Ms. Emery was mentored by the highly talented Gregory Hines and Lloyd Richards. The latter is an award-winning director and Yale School of Drama professor. Crystal Emery worked with Mr. Richards for the production of *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson* (a play written by August Wilson who received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1990). He also produced *Fences*). She toured for six years with these theatre pieces across the country. Through Mr. Richards she met the celebrated filmmaker [Bill Duke](#) who gave her first job as a production assistant for the 1991 film [A Rage in Harlem](#) (an adaptation of the eponymous novel from Chester Himes) starring Robin Givens, [Forrest Whitaker](#) , Gregory Hines and Danny Glover. Notably, Bill Duke directed *The Cemetery Club* in 1993 and this made him historically the first African-American who was fully responsible for an entirely White cast of actors.

All these experiences and acquaintances propelled Ms. Emery to create her first screenplay in 1992 named *Sweet Nez* which was auctioned by the renowned film producer Suzanne de Passe. Later, Ms. Emery created as mentioned her non-profit organization URU, The Right to Be, Inc. that promotes cultural competency and collaboration among diverse racial, social and economic groups. In 1979, Emery began her studies at the University of Connecticut as a theater major.

Throughout the years, the symptoms of Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease aggravated. In 1971, she started to fall for no reason. At the end of high school, it began to be more difficult for Ms. Emery to walk. By 1981, she had received the diagnosis of Charcot-Marie-Tooth. The disease also affects her respiratory system. She uses a wheelchair and sometimes a BIPAP. She often has fever and respiratory illnesses. It happens that she has to use a breathing machine. In 2002, Ms. Emery became quadriplegic, a term that makes her uncomfortable because it can be perceived as limitative and she dislikes labels. Her new condition made her more resilient and she has continued to pursue her endeavors. Emery penned and produced a play called *In the*

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Upper Room

which has been performed off-Broadway over the last 16 years. She created and coordinated a cultural festival, wrote two children's books including biographical photo-essays. She led education events, conducted health literacy programs, produced two documentaries, managed an educational campaign and in 2013 she received her Master's Degree in Public Engagement/Media Studies from The New School for Public Engagement in NY. Before, she obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Connecticut.



Ms. Emery with Dr. Joycelyn Elders, M.D the first African American woman who occupied the role of the United States Surgeon General. One of her powerful quote regarding aspiration is: "You can't be what you can't see!"

Regarding more specifically her latest documentary *Black Women in Medicine*, it was challenging for Ms. Emery to work on her film but she succeeded thanks to her courage and determination. It took her five years from beginning to end to write the script of her documentary. She started in 2011. She dictated her ideas to a typist. Technology helped her also. About seven cities were involved for the shooting. The initiative

Changing the Face of Medicine

has been embraced and defined by filmmaker Bill Duke as an "educational and artistic tour de force." The documentary

Black Women in Medicine

will air on 279 American Public Television (APT) stations in fall 2016. It is important to note that APT is known as the biggest syndicator of programming. The documentary should also be broadcasted on

[TV One](#)

, BET, Bounce TV, Lifetime, OWN including other American channels and elsewhere in the world in other languages. This great documentary deserves a NAACP, an Essence Award and so on. Marlee Matlin who is Jewish became the first and only deaf actress to receive an Oscar as best actress. In addition, Kathryn Bigelow is the only directress in the 88 years of the Academy Awards who won an Oscar. Hence, solely four female filmmakers have been nominated for their directorial achievements: Lina Wertmüller (

Seven Beauties

), Jane Campion (

The Piano

), Sofia Coppola (

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Lost in Translation

), and Kathryn Bigelow (

The Hurt Locker

). The movie of Bigelow was about war. In 2007, the directress Deepa Mehta (an Indo-Canadian) was nominated in the best foreign film category (for

[Water](#)

) but did not win. This movie was about female issues likewise for

[Yentl](#)

(The Jewish actress Barbra Streisand did not earn an Oscar as the best directress in 1984).

Does a feature film or a documentary on female issues have its place at the Oscars ? We will see if next year there will be more diversity among the winners. It would definitely make the Academy more inclusive. Mrs. Emery aims to collect at least an Oscar nomination for her documentary. This would be groundbreaking especially when we live in a world where more than 62 million females do not have access to education.

The film has the power to move people to tears. It is touching to see the emotions of Black women in the documentary when they receive their acceptance letter regarding their residency training. Viewers learn what motivated them since their childhood for some to become physicians. The informative and compelling documentary also covers the history of Black women who were the primary caregivers since they arrived in America centuries ago. Viewers learn for example about the first African-American physician Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler in the nineteenth century. She graduated from medical school in 1864 in New England.

In the film, it is mentioned that in 1969, 2% of all doctors were African-Americans, and in 2008, this figure had risen to only 3%. Changes are extremely slow: a 1% of increase in 40 years. The documentary is educational. For example, we learn in it that Black women die at a greater rate of preventable diseases as of middle-age. Viewers also discover in the film that some physicians overcame incredible odds such as falling pregnant during their teenage years and managed to be a doctor with a specialty. In fact, many females in the documentary are specialists who found a way to break amazing glass ceilings. These women are courageous to speak up and tell the world about their journey including their struggles.

The groundbreaking documentary *Black Women in Medicine* is a celebration of African American female doctors. So far, the film was shown in 15 American cities. It went to different cities across the U.S., including Chicago, St. Louis, Raleigh, North Carolina, Cleveland, Ohio and others.

Prominent health care specialists like Dr. Thomas (who was the first Black female orthopedist in

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the U.S. and it is important to note that this specialty is among the most lucrative in the medical field), [Dr. Barbara Ross Lee](#) (the sister of [Diana Ross](#) who became the first African American dean of an American Medical School), Dr. Benjamin, a former surgeon general of the U.S., Dr. Sharon Malone, an obstetrician and gynecologist, the wife of the former Attorney General Eric Holder, the first African-American to occupy this position and Dr. Elders, the first African-American surgeon general in America are being featured in the documentary. We hear powerful testimonies from them. For instance, Dr. Elders said she never saw growing up a physician and in these circumstances it is difficult to become what you cannot see. Other prominent doctors are there also such as Dr. Velma Scantlebury who became the first Black woman transplant surgeon in America. More than 20 doctors were interviewed for the documentary.

Notably, in 2014, Black women represented 2% of all American physicians. Unfortunately, there is a similar low percentage in other liberal professions in North America and in other Western countries. Let's hope in the future, there will be more real diversity in lucrative professions where we would see additional Blacks, Natives, women and so on. Can the diversity we see in shows such [Grey's Anatomy](#) become a reality? We are looking forward to this.

[Ms. Emery](#) created plenty of initiatives and documentary film programs with social impact as the emphasis. The miniseries *This Is Where I Live, Don't Dump On Me*, aimed to cultivate environmental responsibility and problem-solving strategies among inner city kids.

Sankofa Cultural Art Festival

in 2000 brought together nationally renowned Native American, Latino and African-American artists from America.

Woman to Woman: Helping Ourselves

, was a nationwide series of conferences focused on breast health education targeting for under-served females in urban communities.

Ms. Emery also works as a Public Engagement and Media Specialist, offering strategic planning to diverse institutions and community organizations. She won the Congressional Black Caucus Health Brain Trust Award in Journalism for her first feature length documentary, *The Deadliest Disease in America*

. The film concerns

[racism](#)

in healthcare practices (including how patients "of color" can be treated differently) and earned her the Congressional Black Caucus Health Brain Trust Award in Journalism .

Ms. Emery was featured in [Essence](#) in June 2016 and in [Time magazine](#) on July 20, 2016 .

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As mentioned, she possesses over 30 years of experience in the entertainment industry on stage, screen, etc. as a producer, writer, director and so on in America and Europe. This quote of hers summarizes her mindset: "I refuse to be defined by the body I inhabit; as a deeply passionate and creative individual, I am so much more than a Black woman living with a life-altering physical disability. I am energy in motion and spirit first".

Emery's companion book of the documentary entitled *Against all Odds* begins with these powerful words: "I thank God, The Holy Order of Yodh, and Master Teacher, Guru Madeleine. Her teachings have taught me that I am a writer and to never allow my body to define what I am capable of. I was given the vision for this work and, through God's grace, the courage to make it happen. What are the odds that someone considered a quadriplegic, with paralyzed hands and legs, could produce the first book of biographical photo-essays dedicated to the extraordinary efforts of Black women doctors?" The foreword of the book was written by the legendary historian Dr. Darlene Clark Hine who received three years ago the National Humanities Medal by Mr. President Barack Obama, for her work on raising awareness about the African-American experience.

A popular quote says we can judge a book by its cover. It is definitely the case with Ms. Emery's publication which should be a NY Times best seller. The content is excellent and the book is very informative. It gives an overview of what was done in the past and what is happening in the present in the medical field regarding the important contribution of African-American female doctors. Her book contains powerful images such as Black girls dressed as surgeons. Thus, future readers will find a powerful quote in the book of Dr. Joycelyn Elders, the former U.S. Surgeon General: "You can't be what you can't see." To break the glass ceiling, the women portrayed in the documentary and the book had to overcome three types of discriminatory triple threats: racism, classism and sexism. Another interesting aspect in the film and the book is we discover female physicians with more than one specialty.

The national initiative created by Ms. Emery aims to increase the number of Black physicians in America from four percent in 2016 to seven percent by 2030. Now, 4.5% of all physicians in the United States are African-Americans and 2% of all doctors are Black women which is not representative at all of the population as a whole given that African-Americans are circa 14% of the overall population of the country. The lack of diversity can impact the health of the nation. Hence, *Changing the Face of Medicine* is a groundbreaking multimedia documentary project and educational initiative that honors the history, status and future of women of color in medicine. The film is also about giving hope to African-American children by reminding them they can become physicians during their adulthood. As mentioned, future readers will see in the book inspiring pictures of Black children dressed as doctors.

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Black Women in Medicine had its world premiere in New York City on August 26th at Cinema Village in New York and its Los Angeles premiere on September 2nd at Laemmle's Music Hall, Beverly Hills. Emery chose to launch her documentary at these venues because they are both Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) qualifying cinemas. Ms. Emery wants her film to meet the eligibility criteria for an Academy Award nomination.

If there is a second edition of the companion book, it would be interesting if it included more female Black physicians in mental health such as psychiatrists or geriatricians. In addition, it would be interesting to include more African American women in the most lucrative fields of medicine such as radiology and plastic surgery.

Here are some interesting excerpts from the book: "In 1950 only 133 of US medical graduates were Black, or 2.4 percent of all graduates; most were men trained at the historically Black medical schools of Meharry and Howard". "In the past half-century the percentage of practicing Black physicians increased from 2 percent to an estimated 5 percent of all physicians in 2015". "In 1989, for the first time, the number of Black women surpassed enrollment of Black men. Today two out of three Black graduates of US medical schools are women."

Overall, Ms. Emery wears many hats: she is an authoress, playwright, documentarist and columnist. She published two children's books: *Little Man's Fourth Grade Journey* and *Little Man Loses His Tooth*

. Furthermore, she pens regularly for her column, "Crystal Clear", published by the New Haven Independent. She also participated as a Public Engagement and Media Specialist, providing strategic planning to various institutions and community organizations. Ms. Emery likes cooking, spending time with her family and engaging with young people in significant conversation about the triumph of the human spirit. She does not let the challenges of living with muscular dystrophy beat her or define her and she continues to reach new goals which inspire people.

Women's issues are highly important to Ms. Emery. In this regard, last spring she participated in a panel to close out Women's History Month as the spokesperson for the School of Media Studies at the New School. Her latest documentary *Black Women in Medicine* was showcased at this event. Thus, in March 2016,

The Changing The Face of Medicine National Education Tour

began. It is an interdisciplinary event series showcasing guest speakers, book signings, interactive workshops and an advance screening of

Black Women in Medicine

. Another documentary Mrs. Emery produced was

Experiments on people of Color

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. She also made the film entitled

Open Season

, an analytical exploration of recent race-based murders of Black men. Crystal Emery currently lives in New Haven, CT with her husband Michael and brother Sean.

Crystal Emery has no anger nor bitterness. Her strong faith is an inspiration for all of us. She is a very resilient and inspiring woman. She does not consider herself as a victim and hates labels because they are limitative. Her disease is a comma for her, not a period that will stop her from reaching her goals. She does not let anyone define her. She always has been like that since her formative years. One of the quotes that applies the most to Crystal Emery is from Oprah: "You define your own life. Don't let other people write your script".

In spite of her health issues, Ms. Crystal Emery has not lost her sense of humor. Where some would have sunk into defeatism, Emery regardless of her muscular dystrophy has chosen to fight and make her voice heard through her movies. She always rises while keeping her faith and does not surrender.

America is widely known for its possibility to achieve dreams. I believe this is the beauty of the country. No matter who you are and where you came from, it can be in the cards to make it big. Ms. Emery definitely exemplifies this and our webmag is proud to present this talented filmmaker. Here she talks about her latest projects and her experiences in filmmaking. The interview was conducted last summer .

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BLACK WOMEN IN MEDICINE

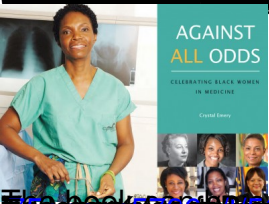


URU THE RIGHT TO BE, INC. PRESENTS "BLACK WOMEN IN MEDICINE" EDITED BY JASON L. POLLAR
ORIGINAL MUSIC BY BILL TOLES DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY ROBERT SHEPARD PRODUCED BY CRYSTAL R. EMERY TED MAYNARD
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