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INSIDE CHARLOTTE ARTS

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Longtime Davidson College English professor Brenda Flanagan teaches creative writing, Caribbean and African-American literature, and literary analysis. She's working on a memoir about her year working for civil rights activist and singer Nina Simone, and how Simone influenced her life.

How Nina Simone influenced an NC professor's journey

BY LIZ ROTHAUS BERTRAND
Arts Correspondent

When Brenda Flanagan arrived at JFK Airport in 1967 from her home on the island of Trinidad, the 19-year-old had $10 in her pocket, a phone number for an American social worker and a closely guarded dream to become a writer.

One of the first people she shared that dream with was none other than N.C. native and civil rights activist Nina Simone. Flanagan would spend a year working as a nanny for the singer's daughter.

Simone was one of several important catalysts in Flanagan's life, and perhaps the most influential in opening her eyes to the creative possibilities for a young Black writer. Looking back, Flanagan also has regrets for not heeding some warnings about her personal life that Simone gave her at the time.

It's all part of the memoir the 77-year old-Davidson College English professor is in the midst of writing. It covers both her time with Simone as well as detailing Simone's connections to the modern civil rights movement "and influence upon people like me, who have gone on to teach the subject."

HANDOUT Sundance Institute

Jazz artist and civil rights activist Nina Simone, a North Carolina native, greatly inspired the life of Davidson College English professor Brenda Flanagan.

Flanagan herself has had a prolific career.

She's an award-winning fiction and nonfiction writer, has represented the U.S. State Department as a cultural ambassador on dozens of trips abroad, and has served nearly 30 years at Davidson.

Flanagan recently spoke with The Charlotte Observer about her life's journey. She spoke to us from her campus office, filled with books, stacks of folders and posters evoking images of resiliency, Black history and faraway places.

'I WANTED TO SEE THESE PEOPLE IN PRINT'

Flanagan read constantly while growing up in Trinidad — even on the six-mile walk to and from elementary school. There was no local library but a van with books from the capital city, Port of Spain, would pass regularly.

"By the time I was 12, I had read everything except the science books in that van," Flanagan said.

Her mother worried that Flanagan, third youngest of 14 children, would go crazy from all of those books.

In school, Flanagan studied Shakespeare and was surprised how the stories resonated with her. "I remember distinctly when we read 'Hamlet,' I thought: 'Wait a minute — Hamlet is seeing ghosts? I know people in my village who are seeing ghosts.

"I wanted to see people like my sister Elaine. I wanted to see Mr. Joe, who we always thought was working with the devil... I wanted to see these people in print because I thought their lives were just as important, stories about them and the stories I could make up about them."

Becoming a writer was a winding path for Flanagan, who quit high school when she was 17 because her family could no longer afford the tuition. Trinidad was transitioning to independence, and there were few options to attend high school without being specially selected for them or having the money to attend.

Flanagan was devastated.

Needing money, she went to work in a cannery, where she sorted rotten peas as they came down a shoot. Her fingers were bent for a couple years because of it, but her imagination didn't stop. At night, she'd write down the stories she'd heard the older factory women recount and make up her own about them.

A chance encounter with her former English teacher, who had become the editor of a major newspaper in Trinidad, got her out of the factory and into the world of politics as a cub reporter.

That's how she met the social worker, who was visiting Trinidad to learn about a new government program for teens. Flanagan, who was saving money so she could go to America, took the woman at her word when she offered her contact info and an open invitation to stay with her in the U.S.

Flanagan used her name and address at the American embassy to get a visa, then wrote to tell her she was coming. She never heard back.

And when the woman didn't come to meet her at the airport as expected, Flanagan broke her only $10 bill to call her. The lady was stunned.

"I think never in her wildest dreams had she really expected... me to come to the United States," Flanagan said. But she agreed to bring Flanagan home temporarily to Brooklyn, New York.

MEETING NINA SIMONE

Flanagan wanted to take college courses to pursue writing, but needed money. She hoped for a job as a domestic worker, where room and board would likely be included and she could save funds to send home and for

SEE SIMONE, 2C

FROM PAGE 1C

SIMONE

college.

An ad in The New York Times led her to an employment agency in Harlem. "Maybe the spirits were working their magic," Flanagan said.

She was skinny with excellent posture, from years of carrying water on her head down the street to her parents' home, so Flanagan said the hiring manager proposed sending her out as a model. She declined. "A model in our culture was the equivalent of a lady of the night," she said.

But when asked if she'd heard of Simone, Flanagan perked up. Simone, who had just been in Trinidad to perform, was looking for a nanny.

The next day, Flanagan went to meet the jazz singer at the RCA Victor Studios in Manhattan, where she was recording. Simone was shocked that Flanagan had missed her performance in Trinidad and turned away from her.

"I just kept praying: Lord, don't let this woman get mad... I need this job terribly."

Eventually, Flanagan said, Simone smiled and invited her to her home in Mount Vernon, New York.

During the year, Simone fired and rehired her. Flanagan declined to elaborate, explaining that she wanted to save some details for her book. "It was a journey," Flanagan said.

But it was Simone who introduced her to African American literature. Even today, Flanagan's own library is based on what she saw in Simone's home.

When Simone wasn't there, she allowed Flanagan to use the library that included books by some of her own friends — people like Langston Hughes and James Baldwin. Simone told her these were books, articles and poems written "by Black people who look like you.'"

"Sometimes when I think about it, I want to cry..." Flanagan said. "I can't tell you how invigorating that was to finally be able to say, 'Yes, there are writers out there in the world who look like me, they're published, people are reading them.'...

"I didn't even know there was something called African American literature but I learned that from her."

NINA SIMONE'S ENDURING INFLUENCE

Flanagan's forthcoming memoir, tentatively titled "Mississippi God-damn," is a nod to Simone's powerful protest song, "Mississippi Goddamn."

"I use the title metaphorically, as Mississippi represents a great deal of what was and still is deplorable in our beloved country," Flanagan said.

The book project is challenging, she said, because it includes aspects of her life that are emotionally difficult, including her pregnancies and her ex-husband.

It's partially a look at how she could have prevented certain negative experiences in her life had she listened more closely to Simone. She worried how these stories may affect her three children, but they encouraged her to complete it.

Simone's legacy has been influential at other key moments in Flanagan's life, too.

As a cultural ambassador, Flanagan has traveled to countries all over the world. Her first opportunity came when her friend, a well-known poet passed on an opportunity and recommended Flanagan to go in his place in the dead of winter to Kazakhstan.

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Growing up on the island of Trinidad, Brenda Flanagan read all the time and was inspired by Shakespeare. She also wanted to see stories about people who looked like her and her community.

People there told her she was the first American writer to visit since Langston Hughes. "Again, I was thinking of Nina, you know, and the things I owed to her."

On her trips, Flanagan spoke about African American literature and her own life in America.

"I was always very frank about... what America had done to people who look like me but how we survive. It was about survival, culturally."

She's been repeatedly asked back by many countries she's visited, including the Czech Republic, a place close to her heart. She has gone as both a scholar and a cultural ambassador. That's where she first discovered a book by the surrealist artist and writer Eva Švankmajerová.

Flanagan returned, determined to meet her (which she did) so she could understand more fully her ideas and their origins.

Švankmajerová became a good friend. She's also one of the subjects of Flanagan's latest book, "Women's Artistic Dissent: Repelling Totalitarianism in Pre-1989 Czechoslovakia," co-written with Hana Waisserová (Lexington Books, December 2023).

AT DAVIDSON COLLEGE

At Davidson College, Flanagan is the Edward M. Armfield Sr. Professor of English, where her courses include subjects like fiction writing, Caribbean literature and world literature.

She arrived at Davidson as a visiting professor in 1994, then returned as a full-time faculty member in 1996.

"The South was not someplace that I really wanted to come back to," said Flanagan, who had spent time at Tuskegee University in Alabama with her former husband who was finishing school there. She later returned to Tuskegee as an instructor and before earning her PhD at the University of Michigan.

But she listened to an inner voice urging her to go to Davidson. "It's only years later that I remembered that Nina grew up in Tryon, North Carolina — not that far from here."

She visited Tryon and eventually met Simone's now-grown daughter at a commemoration ceremony for the singer, who had died in 2003. She also has interviewed many people who knew Simone in her youth.

"I realized this is why I was supposed to come back to the South."

Flanagan said she owes it to Simone to finish her memoir, even if it requires unearthing some unpleasant memories. She's also in discussion with a publisher about the book.

At Davidson, Flanagan also helped establish an Africana studies curriculum along with professors Dan Aldridge and Nancy Fairley. The program examines topics including literature, history, artistic expression and theories of diverse African and African diaspora cultures.

She also served as coordinator of Davidson's Ethnic Studies program, which included an Africana Studies track.

Over the last three decades, Flanagan said the campus has become more inclusive. "There was a time I knew every single student of color on this campus." The same goes for faculty, but that's not true anymore.

"There's a vast difference," she said from a time when people of color were primarily in the kitchen, laundry or cleaning staff.

There's more acceptance now of gender nonconformity, too. "Davidson has changed in enormous ways. Otherwise, I wouldn't have stayed: believe me."

And for now, even though her friends, her younger sister and some former students have retired, Flanagan plans to keep at it. Teaching and her commitment to her students makes it challenging to find time for her own writing projects, including two novels, but she has no plans to stop for now.

Growing up, she said, people simply worked until they died.

"And I'm still here."

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