



LIPSTICK ... PURSE ... VALOR!

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Mother's Anger at Biases' Spurs Salute to History's Heroines

Riveted to her television set, Kate Campbell Stevenson prayed that last week's terrorist action wouldn't get any worse.

It did. Time and again. Outside her home in the suburbs of the nation's capital, she could hear sirens racing toward the city.

Then came the false reports.

A plane was headed for the White House. Buildings along the Mall were on fire. Stevenson's husband, an official with Voice of America, worked in one of those buildings. When he didn't answer his phone immediately, her daughter became hysterical.

"In a moment like that, you re-evaluate everything in your life," Stevenson says from her home, her voice still heavy with emotion. "It becomes clear what is really important to you."

As it turned out, her husband was in no danger. That doesn't mean the Stevenson family escaped unscathed. There is a wound that will be a long time healing, Stevenson says. Not just in her family's psyche, but in the nation's.

One more reason, if she needed any, why the actress never considered canceling her one-woman show, ***Women: Back to the Future***, which is booked for performances Sept. 20-29 at Greenway High School Auditorium.

"The show sends the message that you can take control of your lives and make your dreams come true," she says.

"More than ever, we need to focus on that. We can't let the people who did this rob us of our future. I'll be honest. I'm scared to death to get on that airplane, but I'm determined to come to Phoenix. I believe it is so important."

Stevenson's show profiles courageous women from American history. Each evening, she selects two or three subjects from a cast of characters that includes Abigail Adams, Sacagawea, Lucy Stone, Bessie Coleman and Rachel Carson. (The lineup was to have included Eleanor Roosevelt, but Stevenson's costumers had family injured in New York and weren't able to finish the clothes.)

Stevenson's daughter inspired the show.

"When she was in the fourth grade, I saw her and her peers starting to hold themselves back, not wanting to stick out," Stevenson says. "I did the same thing when I was growing up and I thought, 'I can't let this happen to her.'"

"It was a mother's anger at seeing cultural and gender biases being perpetuated. What's that phrase, 'You've come a long way, baby'? Perhaps we have, but there are so many subtle biases that still exist. We need to educate young girls - and young boys - as to how important it is to develop themselves to their fullest potential."

Women: Back to the Future began as a school show, but word spread, and soon Stevenson found herself traveling to all parts of the country, presenting her program to conventions, church groups and civic organizations. The Greenway Parent Action Club sponsors her Valley appearance.

"It has a message for all people, regardless of their age," she says. "It's an encouragement to make a plan, to set priorities . . . to not let anything hold you back, particularly yourself. So many times, people come up with excuses for not doing what they want to do when they, themselves, are the biggest hindrances."

Stevenson had specific reasons for selecting the women she portrays.

"If you asked me my definition of 'courageous,' I guess it would be never giving up, or facing fear and breaking through it," she says.

"Each of these women overcame incredible obstacles to fulfill their dreams. Take Bessie Coleman. She not only was the first Black person - man or woman - to become a pilot, she did it two years before Amelia Earhart. Can you imagine what Coleman's struggle was like? A Black woman in the South of the early 1900s who wanted to learn how to fly? Just how impossible was that? But she made it happen. She was a woman of courage."

One of Stevenson's hopes is that her show will encourage young girls and women to discover women of courage in their own families.

"I hope it stirs up questions like, 'Hey, Grandma, what was important to you when you were a girl?' " the actress says.

"Courageous acts are not always big things that make headlines; sometimes they're tiny things that no one hears about.

"We need to search out those things and celebrate them and make them part of our own lives. In the days to come, we are all going to need to be people of courage."

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