

Today's
weather
picture by:
Kallista Garnet, 8,
Vancouver,
Mill Plain Elementary



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2005



DAVE BARRY

Pickup line key to survival of species

So I was at this party, and I wound up at a table where three attractive single women were complaining about — surprise! — men. Specifically, they were complaining about the pickup lines that had been used on them in a bar a few nights earlier.

One woman said: "This guy comes up to me and says, 'Are you a teacher?' I mean, is that supposed to be romantic?"

All three women rolled all six of their eyes.

Another one of them said: "This guy says to me, 'I've been looking at you all night!' So I go, 'He-LO, we just GOT here.'"

At this point, all three women — and I want to stress that these are intelligent, nice women — were laughing. Not me. I was feeling bad for the guys.

I realize that there are certain hardships that only females must endure, such as childbirth, waiting in lines for public-restroom stalls, and a crippling, psychotic obsession with shoe color. Also, females tend to reach emotional maturity very quickly, so that by age 7 they are no longer capable of seeing the humor in loud, inadvertent public blasts of flatulence, whereas males can continue to derive vast enjoyment from this well into their 80s.

So I grant that it is not easy being a female. But I contend that nature has given males the heaviest burden of all: the burden of always having to Make the First Move, and thereby risk getting Shot Down. I don't know WHY males get stuck with this burden, but it's true throughout the animal kingdom. If you watch the nature shows on the Discovery Channel, you'll note that whatever species they are talking about — birds, crabs, spiders, clams — it is ALWAYS the male who has to take the initiative. It's always the male bird who does the courting dance, making a total moron of himself, while the female bird just stands there, looking aloof, thinking about what she's going to tell her girlfriends. ("And then he hopped around on one foot! Like I'm supposed to be impressed by THAT!").

Male insects have it the worst. The Discovery Channel announcer is always saying things like: "After the mating, the female mantis bites off the male mantis' head, and then she and her girlfriend mantises use it to play a game that looks a lot like Skee Ball."

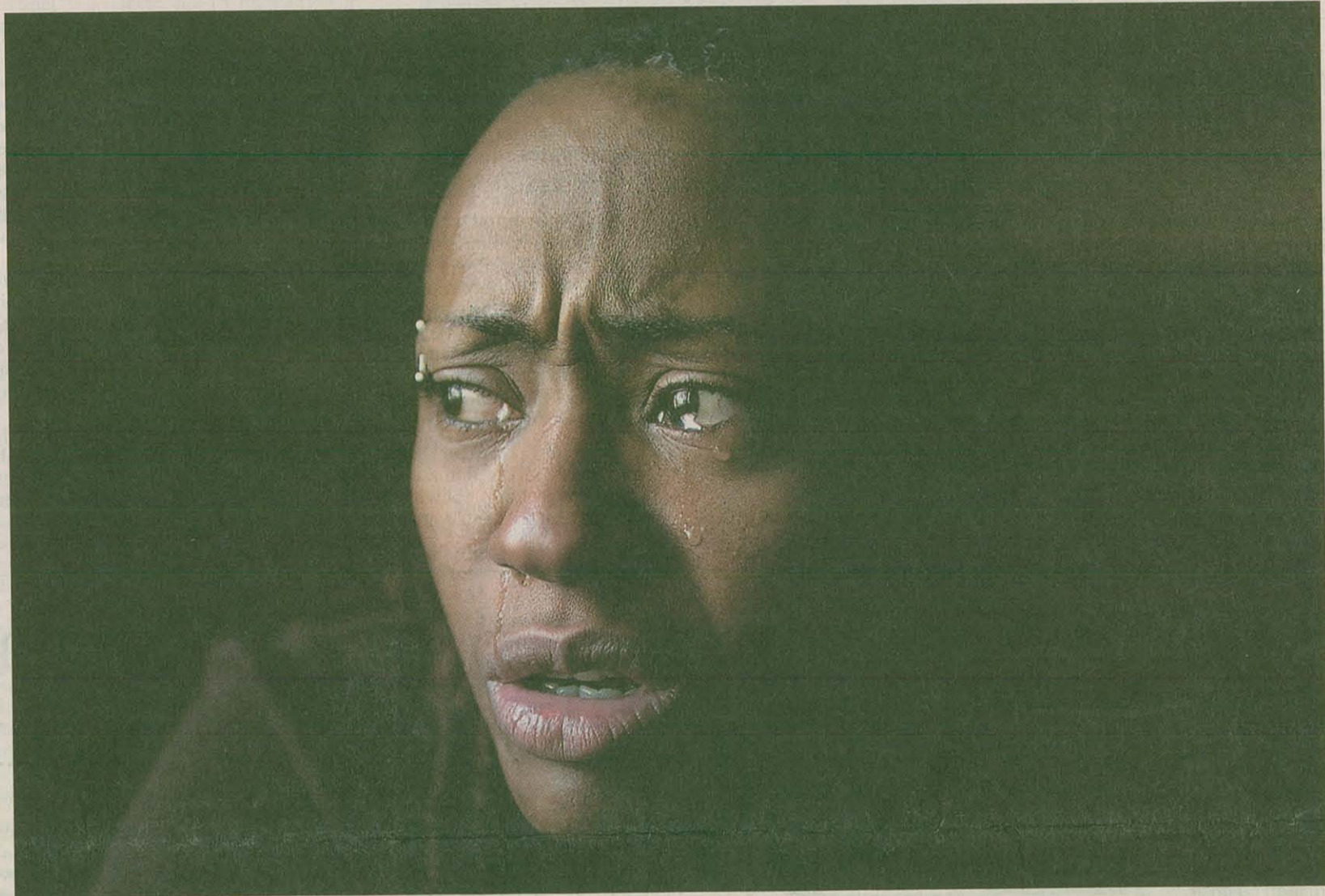
Because I live in Florida, my patio is basically a giant singles bar for lizards. On any given day during mating season, I'll see dozens of male lizards out there making their most suave lizard move, which consists of inflating and deflating a red pouch under their chins. They seem to think that female lizards really go for a guy with a big chin

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UNDERNEATH the portrait

Vancouver woman tries to change her life by chasing her dream



Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

Latosha Williams hopes her artwork can lead her and her 8-year-old son, Maisean Stephens, to a better place.

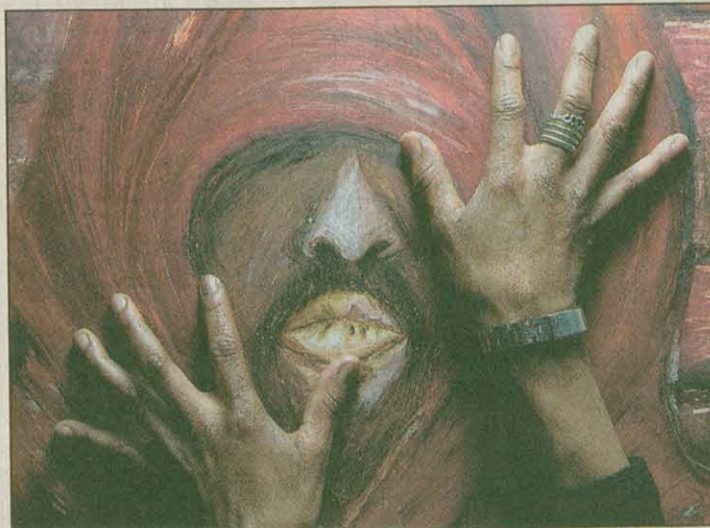
By BRETT OPPEGAARD
Columbian staff writer

It wasn't the commute by bus from east Vancouver to the Art Institute of Portland. It wasn't going to school during the day, cleaning toilets and emptying trash at night. It wasn't the seemingly constant search for someone responsible to watch her young son as she worked and studied.

It was textbooks. Tuition to the art school was covered by her grants but not the textbooks, meaning Latosha Williams had to borrow from other students each term and photocopy what she thought would be the most important pages. She only could afford a few black-and-white copies each time, which led to a predictably miserable experience in a color theory course. Williams dropped out.

Depressed, and unable to find someone she trusted to watch her son at night, she quit her janitor job, too, and tumbled into the realm of full public assistance.

With various poverty-relief programs providing basic housing and food, Williams recently began trying to paint



Virtually all of Williams' work so far has focused on male faces, including "Red Sea," which was painted last year. Her inspiration: "I was angry. I was hurt. ... I had been angry for a while. I'm a passionate person, and red is passionate."

her way out of the situation.

Nurturing a need

Primarily self-taught, the 32-year-old has begun exploring her potential as an artist at a time when Vancouver seems as receptive as ever.

Not only can Williams find walls for her work in restaurants and shops around town,

she's also discovering various support networks that could help her make the transition into galleries and eventually into a self-sustaining career.

Two co-ops and at least a half-dozen individual studios have opened downtown within the past year, and a major hub of creativity is under development in the ARTillery Building at the Reserve.

She's learning about the city's fledgling Art Walk: Alive After Five (similar to Portland's First Thursday) and Storefront Galleries (which places artwork in empty downtown storefronts), while trying to get someone — anyone, really — to notice her, too.

Williams started by contacting a familiar place, her son's elementary school in Fruit Valley. Staff there liked her work and referred her to Karen Brown, Clark College's multicultural student affairs retention manager.

Brown looked at Williams' portfolio and suggested the black painter bring it to the college in January to be part of the Martin Luther King Jr. celebration. Since most of her pieces aren't framed, Williams had no way to properly hang her paintings. She simply thumbtacked them to a bulletin board and propped the bigger ones up on a table outside the gala. She then stood by to see what would happen, officially showing the pieces to the public for the first time.

She didn't get any sales, but she did compile a list of 15

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“Every entrepreneur, every artist, started in the dirt. That's what I'm doing.”

~ Latosha Williams

your Guide:



The latest fake indoor house plants are practical and look like the real thing /D3



Travel: Festival helps teach beginners the first steps in ice climbing /D4

Coming Monday:

A look at the big winners at this year's Grammy Awards /D1

UNDERNEATH the portrait

“I feel like, dammit, I deserve this, and nobody’s going to give it to me.”

~ Latosha Williams

Williams gets thrilled by any success at this stage, including being chosen as a volunteer for a gallery, or, here, reveling in the idea that a business in town might put her work on display.



For weeks, Williams had been working up the nerve to approach Sunrise Bagels about displaying her paintings at the downtown shop. Instead of setting up an appointment, though, Williams decided to just stop in one day after lunch time and see what would happen. Owner Janine Ellsworth, above, listened to the pitch and gave Williams hope.

Maisean Stephens, 8, helps inspire his mother to steadfastly pursue her career as an artist.

Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN of The Columbian



Before coming to Vancouver, Williams cut a rap album under the stage name T-Love. Her experience in the music industry, she says, helped prepare her for challenges in the art world.

“God gave me a gift for visual communication. ... I think I’m one of the chosen ones.”

~ Latosha Williams

Artist:

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people interested in her work. “I just wanted to give her a chance,” Brown said. “She doesn’t have a shop. She doesn’t have any kind of place of business. The more exposure she has, the more she’ll be able to get ideas from people about her work.” Response to Williams and her paintings — primarily dark portraits of men in urban settings — was so positive that Brown asked her to come back again this week, showing the pieces in similarly informal style from noon to 1 p.m. Wednesday in the Gaiser Hall student center. Williams, who moved from Tacoma to Vancouver five years ago to settle in a safer city, also has begun volunteering at the North Bank Community Artists Project, one of downtown Vancouver’s new co-ops. She’s labored in warehouses, on assembly lines, sold vacuums, been a telemarketer and a janitor, so one of the first tasks she took at North Bank

was cleaning the restrooms. When she was done, she asked volunteer coordinator Sharri LaPierre if she possibly could hang her work in there.

Building a supply, self-esteem

Williams now lives in subsidized housing in Fruit Valley in a single-level duplex, accented by red brick. She receives \$440 in cash each month, from which she has to pay \$54 toward rent, plus her utilities and other expenses. That not only means no cellular phone for Williams, but no credit card or bank account, either. Yet with the recent sale of her first print, for \$40, Williams believes her life has started to head in a new and better direction. When talking about her art career with her 8-year-old son, Maisean Stephens, she tries to put it into terms through which he can relate. “I’m going to be doing, like, a big painting some day, and put it up in a place, like a bagel company, and it’s going to be, like, really, really cool, and we’re going to get a lot of money and be able to buy a whole bunch of

Push Pops.” Maisean cheers: “Yaaaay! ... And we can get candy. And lots of stuff. ... Mamma, can we get cable for my birthday? Will we have enough money?” “We’ll have to work that out, man,” Williams says as the dream deflates with the tone of her voice. “How about we order it to, like, get the first two months free, then cancel it?” Williams acknowledges that becoming a professional artist might be a long shot. Financially, though, her situation couldn’t be much worse, so she figures she might as well do something she loves.

Finding ways to succeed

Williams has proven to be passionate about her artwork and devoted to it since her early teenage years, when she took a lengthy mail correspondence course, her most significant artistic training. Being poor for so long, too, has taught her to be resourceful and resilient. Most of the furniture in her apartment came from curbside trash

collections. She also scavenges for art supplies. Williams will paint or draw with whatever she can get (pastels, oils, acrylics, chalk, Halloween face makeup, fingernail polish) and put that on any hard surface she can find (plywood, construction paper, cardboard, tablecloth, portions of broken cabinets). She keeps a stack of discarded frames for eventual reconditioning. Shaven on top, with a touch of gray showing, her otherwise black hair is kept long in the back. Her artistic style includes clippings of those dreadlocks glued to her paintings. She also cuts bandannas and baseball caps to put into the work. As she’s creating, she grabs objects from around her household and tries them on the various surfaces. During a recent session, she pulled a silver loop earring out to plug it into the lobe of one of her characters. When she works, she typically has incense burning. She smokes, too, Kool menthols. Williams also dances as she paints, and freestyle raps, meaning there’s loud and constant music in the background that makes

Did you know?

The Friends of the Arts recently began offering a free referral service for local artists, helping such entrepreneurs locate regional resources for training, developing business plans and other related activities. For more information, call executive director Doug Sessions at 360-574-9552.

everything seem like it’s happening to either the soul sounds of India Arie or a gansta soundtrack. Williams primarily paints with her fingers, although she sometimes uses Q-tips and toothbrushes. “I’m driven by my emotions,” she says, dancing to the beat as she glides her fingers across pastels smeared on cardboard. “God gave me a gift for visual communication. ... I think I’m one of the chosen ones.” Last year, she tired of the two-dimensional portraits she kept creating, so she prayed, “God, please give me something different.” Inspired by the

moment, that was the first time she used a clipping of her hair, a cutting from a bandanna, to create a piece she calls “Ghetto Jesus.” “Every entrepreneur, every artist, started in the dirt,” she said. “That’s what I’m doing.”

The man within

Almost all of Williams’ paintings focus on men’s faces. Usually wearing hoods, sometimes with the rough facial features emerging from the hoods, like being born through the cloth. This abstract subtext comes from Williams’ desire, she says, to release “the internal man.” She’s considered herself a lesbian since she was 13. Experimenting with men led to her son, but otherwise, she’s preferred women as romantic partners. In turn, she sees herself in each man she paints, especially in their lips. “(Latosha) has great potential,” says LaPierre of North Bank. “She’s still working on cardboard. She doesn’t have any money for supplies. She paints with her fingers, which comes

out of necessity. Most of us are taught to paint with a brush and eventually our fingers. She’s just going the opposite way. ... A lot of what’s she’s going through in life, she’s working those things out in her artwork. When she works those out, then that will be reflected in her imagery.” Williams’ emotions often are eruptive, the artist acknowledges, ranging from fits of laughter and glee to uncontrollable sobbing and depression. She ponders why her father left her as a toddler, why she didn’t have a good relationship with her mother growing up, why other people have things and opportunities that she doesn’t. She likes to act tough. There are times, though, that she can’t help but cry. “I keep thinking that I’m going to be OK,” Williams says. “I feel like, dammit, I deserve this, and nobody’s going to give it to me.”

Showing her stuff

Emboldened by the positive reactions at Clark College and North Bank, Williams decides to spontaneously stop at a nearby Sunrise

Bagels. A friend had suggested she offer her work for display there. Williams pulls into the downtown Vancouver parking lot in her 1988 Oldsmobile Cutlass, which she bought for \$185 and dressed up with a \$39 set of chrome hubcaps. Before Williams gets out of the car, though, she closes her eyes and prays under her breath, “Good things. Good things.” After Williams introduces herself, the bagel shop operator, Janine Ellsworth, invites Williams into an office in the back. As Williams walks behind the counter, she gives a quick flex of her biceps, pumping herself up for the pitch. Ellsworth, who recently bought the retail part of the bagel operation with her husband, acknowledges, “I’m looking for things for our walls, and I, uh, ...” “Have them,” Williams blurts, as she pulls a variety of paintings from her Art Institute of Portland case. Within seconds, she has Ellsworth feeling the dreadlocks, following the brush strokes with her fingers, talking about when the work can be

hung. Then, there’s a sudden moment of hesitation, when Ellsworth asks, “Now you can bring in things that are framed, and ...?” “Yeah, oh, yeah, definitely. I’m working on all sorts of things,” Williams responds. “But everything’s been happening so fast, so fast.” “And a picture of you, with a little write-up about yourself? ... I’m working on the personal aspects of things that we serve.” “OK, good, OK,” Williams says. “Real personal. That’s good. That’s love. ... Thank you so much. And I’ll give you a call on Monday, and we can set up an official date. ... OK, thank you. Thank you, all right. All right. ... Can I hug you?” Ellsworth shrugs and smiles, and Williams gives her a quick embrace. In the parking lot on the way to her car, an ecstatic Williams can’t help but scream “Yes!” “Slam, man. I was like Shaq, slam, man. Thank you Jesus,” Williams says. “After that, I feel like I can do anything, man. Oh my god, I can do any damn thing.”