

Valerie Graves, author of 'Pressure Makes Diamonds,' to visit OU on Nov. 21

Oakland University will welcome author and advertising guru Valerie Graves for a special presentation from 3-5 p.m. on Monday, Nov. 21 in the Nyberg Room at the Kresge Library, where Graves will be signing copies of her new book, "Pressure Makes Diamonds: Becoming the Woman I Pretended to Be."

"It is an inspiring story of one woman's struggles and successes," said Dr. C. Robert Maxfield, special assistant to the President and Provost for the OU-Pontiac Partnership. "It is a story that we are proud to share with the Oakland University and Pontiac communities."

A former teenage parent from Pontiac, Mich., Graves broke barriers in advertising as one of the first black copywriters at BBDO, Kenyon & Eckhardt, and JWT. She went on to an award-winning career as chief creative officer at the UniWorld and Vigilante/Leo Burnett agencies, senior vice president of creative services at iconic Motown Records, and creative consultant to President Bill Clinton.

"Like many African Americans of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, I struggled with well-known societal ills," Graves said. "I was no stranger to the broken home, the absent father, and the gnawing presence of economic lack. Despite above-average intelligence, I did not escape teenage motherhood and watched my brilliant brother lose his future to incarceration. I dropped out of college and was sometimes my own rebellious worst enemy."

"But, like many who succeed against bad odds, I was buoyed by a dream and the expectation that I would have a future that no one in my world had known."

With marches, riots, and demonstrations as the backdrop, and rock 'n' roll as a soundtrack, "Pressure Makes Diamonds" accompanies Graves as she traverses the seismically shifting terrain of 1960s and '70s America on a stumbling quest to "be somebody."

"Armed with dreams, will, and a bit of luck, I fought and schemed my way into the white-male-dominated world of major league advertising and set my sights on its upper echelons," Graves said. "Once there, I discovered that my challenging life had given me a unique advantage in an increasingly multicultural world."

During the golden era of black advertising, Graves became an undisputed "somebody." Soon, though, she learned that money, success, a good marriage, and connections that reached all the way to the White House could not entirely insulate her against social bias.

"Back in the mid-nineties, a corporate client paid me what he thought was a compliment: 'Come on now, you're not really black. You're a time ad executive,'" she said. "That long-ago 'compliment' had been based on the assumption that being black is something to be transcended. My book is about the transcendent imperative of being a black woman."

In 2007, recognizing Graves's stellar career and public service via the Advertising Council and the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, industry coalition ADCOLOR granted her the title of "Legend."

"My struggles had not just made me strong, they had given me an enduring connection to the collective black consciousness and deep insight into what makes us want what we want and love what we love," said Graves, who currently resides in New York City.

"Being 'really' black was what elevated me from fast-track creative to industry leader. I had not moved past being black; blackness had propelled me to achievement and become my unique 'X' factor."

Maxfield said he hopes her story will inspire others, particularly those in the Pontiac community, to pursue their own dreams.

"Hopefully, she will become a role model for young people who have experienced similar struggles and dream of similar successes," he said.



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