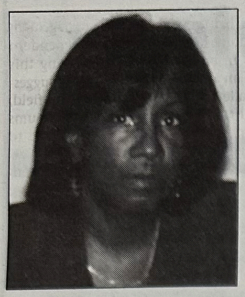
Women's Voices by Sheila Key

SHARON GRANT HENRY



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Sharon Grant Henry traces her desire to improve America's education system back to the early days of her own schooling.

"I hated school in the third grade," she says. "I remember sitting in class that year, thinking, `There has got to be a better way than this to educate people,' because I was miserable."

Only after young Sharon was placed in a program for gifted children did she realize how exciting learning can be. Surprisingly though, the grown-up Sharon — now, at 43, a professor of counseling and school psychology at San Diego State University and director of SDSU's Community-Based Block (CBB) Program — does not advocate separating students into gifted programs.

"I think all children are gifted and should be treated like they're gifted," she says. "I am passionate about our children flourishing — not just African-American children, but also Latino children, Native American children, Asian children and white children — because I know that the only way it can be good for any one of those groups is if we love and nurture all children."

"Nurture" is a word that comes up a lot when Henry talks about kids and education. In addition to her work at SDSU, she involves herself in several volunteer projects whose aim is to support children's developmental needs. One of these is a Saturday School with an Afro-centric curriculum, which was set up by the African American Women's Conference Committee. Another is the Affirmative Non-Judgmental Operative Learning Group, which specializes in cross-cultural communication and organizational development. She serves on the state Department of Education's Committee on Teacher Credentialing and its Task Force on School Violence. And, as a single mom who raised two children of her own, Henry now opens her home as a temporary haven for homeless children.

"Instead of runaways, I'd call them escapees," she says. "Had they not gotten out of their violent home life, they'd be dead."

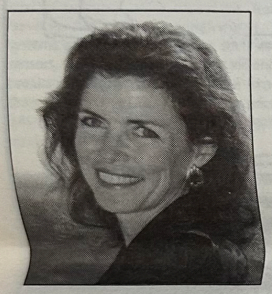
Born into a Navy family in Norfolk, Va., Henry spent three years in Cuba before coming to San Diego at age 10. She earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from UCSD, where she was also among the first three students to complete the teacher education program. Later she got her master's degree and doctorate in cognitive psychology at Princeton – but not before completing SDSU's CBB Program, the very program she directs today.

Now in its 20th year, the CBB program was created by Dr. David Malcolm as a way of teaching community activists of various ethnicities to be counselors. "These were people who could benefit from having counseling skills, because they were doing intervention work, anyway," Henry explains. "We have tried to remain faithful to Dr. Malcolm's vision, though there have been some changes over the years. Today everyone in our program has some community orientation, though not all are activists." The program each year involves about 30 students, approximately two-thirds of whom are people of color.

Another of Henry's passions — since being diagnosed with lupus two years ago — is raising awareness of this tubercular skin disease that strikes black women in disproportionately high numbers. "Nine out of 10 lupus sufferers are women, and of those nine, approximately seven are black," she says. "And when black women have it, we have it more severely — with more kidney, brain or heart involvement."

While about 500,000 people in this country have been diagnosed with lupus, Henry says she has read that another 500,000 may have it without knowing it. And for her own part, Henry spent 12 years in search of a proper diagnosis. "I'm a woman, I'm black, and, at the time, I was poor. You put those three things together and you do not get good health care," she concludes.

NANCY GARDNER



"I'm more interested in helping women own their own homes, if possible. And my hope is that it will be fun — not a chore, not something you dread."

It was the early `80s; a time when real estate was booming and Nancy Gardner thought it would be a good idea to have a real estate sales license. She had been buying and selling property in San Diego — her first deal was "one of those flying-by-the-seat-of-your-pants things" that could easily have gone awry but didn't — and she thought a formal licensing program would help her know what she was doing.

"So I went to Anthony's School of Real Estate here in San Diego, and completed the program in a month," she recalls. "They told me I couldn't, but I did. But then I didn't do a whole lot with [the license], because, when I found out what real estate was really like, I realized I didn't like it very much. I guess I had my own dream of how I wanted it to be, and it wasn't happening for me. So for years I was in and out of real estate."

While out, she did such things as sell commercial laundry equipment to hotels and hospitals, go back to school for training in computer programming, and set up her own computer consulting firm. What led her back to real estate was the idea of equity sharing, an arrangement in which, through the involvement of investors, first-time buyers can more easily own their own homes.

"I was getting so tired of hearing people say, `I've given up the idea of ever owning [property] in San Diego; it's just too much money,'" says Gardner, 42. "And I thought, with equity sharing, here's a terrific idea to help them afford to." To her dismay, however, she found no support for the idea among the brokers with whom she discussed it.

What to do?

One weekend, while on a trip with a girlfriend, she found her answer. "My friend said, `Tell me, was it always men who said you couldn't do this?' and I said, `Come to think of it, it was.' So she said, `Well, why not just start targeting women, then?'"

And so, in 1989, Gardner got herself a broker's license and founded her own company, Hestia Realty. "Hestia is the Greek goddess of hearth and home," she says. "But I'm now changing the name to Nancy Gardner Realty, since I've found that more people recognize my name."

As for implementing a successful equity sharing program, "it's been kind of a rough road," Gardner concedes. "I thought I was going to save the world and help women with no money and no equity, but investors want a return on their investment. And with what's been going on in the real estate market since 1990 . . ." Need she say more?

No matter. She retrenched and went on. Today Gardner, who is located in Clairemont, continues to do a spritely business with a largely female clientele.

"I've sort of evolved into walking women through the process," Gardner says. "I spend a lot of my time doing seminars and explaining loan programs. I'm real adamant about making sure that everyone understands up front what they're getting into, what it's going to cost and what's possible for them. I have clients who come to me who really are not in a position to buy, and if that's the case, I tell them so. I'm not that interested in making a sale. I'm more interested in helping women own their own homes, if possible. And my hope is that it will be fun – not a chore, not something you dread."

Gardner's policy is to represent either the buyer or the seller, never both. "If you represent the buyer, you want to get the very most for her dollar, and if you represent the seller, you want to get the highest possible price," she says. "So I represent one or the other because you can't possibly be fair to both." Of course there are brokers who do represent both parties. But Gardner is quick to point out: "I'm doing this my way!"

LYNN SCHUETTE

"Artists deserve the chance to experiment and make mistakes. So basically, we treat artists as royalty."

It all started with a bar of soap in a tiny Chicago suburb. Gearing up for the all-important Halloween soap-drawing contest, which would find many a pint-sized artist adorning the windows of local businesses with ghoulish imagery, then-kindergartner Lynn Schuette sat at home perfecting her pumpkins.

"And I remember my babysitter, this older woman, telling me that that was what everyone was going to draw and that I should draw something different," she says. "It was like this important early lesson — I mean, what was I, five? — and it instilled in me that, no, I really don't want to be like everyone else." So Schuette bagged the pumpkin idea and, although she doesn't quite recall what she drew instead, won second place in the contest.

"And I've wanted to be an artist ever since," she says. Indeed, she has been an artist ever since. What's more, as executive director of Sushi, the performance and visual art space she founded in downtown San Diego nearly 13 years ago, Schuette is widely regarded as a major player in the performance community, not just locally, but nationally.

Of course, there were detours. "Even though I loved art, I also wanted to be a doctor," Schuette recalls. And because she was smart, she was urged in that direction. Prompted by the suggestion of a well-meaning relative, Schuette tried her hand at medical illustration but found it too stifling. "Finally I put my foot down . . . and became a painter."

She earned a Bachelor of Fine Art degree from the University of Illinois and did some graduate work at UC Berkeley before coming to San Diego in 1972. Here she found no contemporary galleries to speak of, so she did what so many artists do: wait tables. After about seven years of "splitting body and spirit" in this way, Schuette had an aha! experience.

"I had a conversation with myself about the fact that, if I was serious about being a contemporary artist, and there were simply no venues showing the kind of work I was doing, that part of my responsibility was to make those venues happen."

To gain arts administration experience, Schuette began volunteering with the Escondido Regional Arts Council and later worked as a grant writer and assistant director of the city of San Diego's Community Arts Program through a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act grant. By time the CETA money dried up, Schuette had garnered enough experience and confidence to make a go of her dream.

And so, in 1980, she moved into an Eighth Avenue space — both to live and work (though she has since moved into separate living quarters, also downtown) — and named the place Sushi, her own nickname. "It was perfectly enigmatic. I didn't want the name to say what it was. I wanted people to come with an open mind, not with preconceived notions about what art is supposed to be."

Sushi is about debunking preconceptions.

"Ask the average person on the street what art is, and they're likely to say something about the Mona Lisa and museums," Schuette says. "They don't have a sense that art can be about them. We're interested in demystifying art and in challenging the long-held beliefs that 1) only dead artists get shown, 2) that contemporary artists only mature late in life, and 3) that art objects are made to be bought by rich people. In a nutshell, that's the traditional view.

"Our intention is to support artists unequivocally," she continues. "Artists deserve the chance to experiment and make mistakes. So basically, we treat artists as royalty."

This month, Sushi is showing works by Minnesota's Melba Price and the Bay Area's James Anderson. Its performance schedule resumes next month with Rhodessa Jones' "The Blue Stories: Black Erotica About Letting Go" (Dec. 3-5) and Pomo Afro Homos' "Dark Fruit" (Dec. 10-12).