

Black interior designer makes her mark in green

By AMBER TAFARI LARAQUE
Special to the AmNews

Talent and vision are some of the qualities that it takes to be a good and successful interior designer. When Robin Wilson began her interior design business in 2000, she had both of these, but she set herself aside from other designers with her passion for a more eco-friendly environment.

Black New Yorker

Growing up in Austin, Texas, Wilson suffered from allergies and asthma. While being eco-friendly is still relatively new to many people, it is something that Wilson and her family always had to be aware of. "Everything that my mom did in the home, and my grandma did in the home, had to be sensitive to my allergies."

Like Wilson, many African-Americans suffer from allergies and asthma. According to Wilson, one in six Black children suffer from allergies, and one in four suffers from asthma. With these alarming statistics, she entered the eco-friendly design industry 11 years ago, branding her in-

terior design firm Robin Wilson Home in 2006. Wilson is based in New York City, her office is in Manhattan, and her designs can be found in homes and offices throughout the city.



Robin Wilson

Though she is not the first African-American woman to make a mark in the home and design industry, Wilson has certainly created her own lane in the business. She has become the first woman to license her name to eco-custom cabinetry and bath. In addition, Bed, Bath & Beyond's website will carry the Robin Wilson Home line of licensed bedding & bath products beginning in January.

Wilson also worked on President Bill Clinton's Harlem office. "[Designer] Sheila Bridges did his office, and

See DESIGNER on page 44

THE URBAN AGENDA

By David R. Jones



Poverty and Suffering Today and as It Looked 100 Years Ago

A third of all low-income single mothers in New York City, who have among the highest poverty rates in the city, reported going hungry in 2011 because they lacked sufficient money to buy food. Nearly half of them fell behind on their rent, and 38 percent could not fill a needed prescription. In the richest city in America (55 billionaires), poverty is a reality for 1.6 million New Yorkers - many whom are working low-wage jobs that offer but a glimmer of hope in advancement beyond their present economic status.

Evidence of poverty is all around us. But how many of us are conscious of it? The man on the corner with a paper cup, the boy sitting against a wall with a message scrawled on a piece of cardboard, the figure sleeping in a deserted doorway. Indeed, the majority of those suffering and at risk of falling further behind are blacks and Latinos, young people without education and those who have experienced long-term joblessness.

The faces of poverty during the turn of the 20th century in New York City looked quite different - they were mainly faces of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Although they shared a similar lack of political power and influence with their present day contemporaries, their plight nevertheless ignited a movement to assist and study the poor.

A photo exhibit which recently opened at Columbia University's Wallach Gallery, "Social Forces Visualized: Photography and Scientific Charity, 1900-1920," captures that period in stark and unforgiving imagery. In many ways, the exhibit illustrates the continuum of poverty and hardship afflicting the poor that has spanned 100 years.

For example, there is the photo of a barefoot mother with a child and a young boy with leg braces hawking newspapers. These are among numerous photographs illustrating harsh life inside New York City's pre-war tenements where tuberculosis and other preventable diseases ravaged families.

The *Social Forces Visualized* exhibit also includes a film on tuberculosis produced by Thomas Edison's film company in 1912. The film was made in collaboration with the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis, the government, and the Charity Organization Society.

Emergence of Photography

More than 125 photographs were selected for the exhibit from Community Service Society (CSS) records at Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library. The rise in social work that these conditions initiated coincided with the emergence of photography as a way of both documenting social problems and spurring reforms to help poor people advance.

CSS's predecessor organizations - the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) - organized in 1843 - and the Charity Organization Society (COS) - founded in 1882 - hired the photographers whose work is displayed in *Social Forces Visualized*.

As immigrants flocked to America in the early 19th century and the effects of the Industrial Revolution brought thousands

to New York from rural communities, the city's population exploded. In 1848 alone, 160,000 immigrants entered the Port of New York. Many newcomers crowded into lower Manhattan, living in poverty. New York's entrepreneurs and the media were justifiably alarmed at this influx of destitution. It was in this environment that the AICP was born.

Photography and the media would help seed a tradition of giving and become an integral part of charitable strategies to assist the poor. One of the best examples of this is the New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, which is celebrating its centennial this year.

Two of the most prominent photographers of the progressive era - Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis - contributed many photos to CSS predecessor organizations. Many of their photographs are displayed in the exhibit. Hine and Riis had a profound effect on how the politicians and the public viewed the everyday life of the poor. Both individuals were instrumental in the movement to alleviate the worst excesses of poverty in America.

Hine's photographs were widely circulated in magazines, newspapers, and journals by the National Child Labor Committee. Although there were many organizations and activists working to get child labor laws passed at the time, Hine's photographs are generally recognized as the most important reason why states began to strengthen child labor laws.

The rapid growth of America's cities and its urban population was matched by a rise in squalor and poverty that shocked many people. One of America's first photojournalists, Jacob Riis, made his name by publishing photographs depicting the living conditions of the urban poor. Riis would become famous for a book entitled "How the Other Half Lives," which included some of his most grim photographs of life in poverty.

New Poor, Same Struggle

While the most wretched conditions of sanitation and housing represented in the exhibition have been somewhat alleviated over time, poverty still engulfs a large portion of city residents. Today, more than three million New Yorkers live in low-income households and one in five lives in poverty. The immigrant poor of a hundred years ago have been largely replaced by newcomers from Latin America and Asia, but the struggle to defeat poverty goes on.

As New Yorkers of all walks of life experience this powerful exhibition - particularly those in positions of power and leadership - we hope they make the connection between efforts to assist the poor one hundred years ago and the efforts needed today to create opportunities for low-income New Yorkers and the working poor to achieve economic security.

"Social Forces Visualized" will be at the Wallach Art Gallery, 826 Schermerhorn Hall, Columbia University, until December 17. Gallery hours are 1-5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday. The exhibit is free.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for more than 165 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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Designer

Continued from page 5

we have worked on other spaces in that office since 2004," she said.

Wilson is also an author and detailed her work on Robert Kennedy Jr.'s home in her book, "Kennedy Green House." This fall, Wilson appeared on a segment of the No. 1-rated HGTV show, "Selling New York."

While breaking her own professional barriers, Wilson is also breaking barriers in the African-American community, showing that while design-

ing beautiful things, you can still help save lives.

Because she is in New York, Wilson knows that it is hard to avoid the daily pollution problems of this city, but she offered some tips to *AmNews* readers to stay healthy.

"The first thing you need to do is wash your hands on a regular basis," Wilson said. "I believe daily sunlight is very important. Drink tons of water. Eat fresh fruit."

Wilson gave more guidelines for staying healthy that cost little to nothing, including taking off your shoes before entering your home, closing

the toilet lid before flushing, dusting under the bed once a month, changing and replacing your pillow and changing your shower curtain. She also suggests washing drapes or curtains once a year.

If you have the money, Wilson suggests buying and replacing the cabinetry and other products that you have in your home with products such as those from Robin Wilson Home that have formaldehyde-free adhesives and low to no VOCs (volatile organic compounds). Another plus: Her products are American-made.

Some may argue that they are used to doing things a certain way and they are attached to their products. However, Wilson said, "Certain things are heavily fragranced such as your detergents and bath cleansers; that does not necessarily mean clean, and it can be a trigger for asthma and allergies."

And when it comes to spending money, Wilson said it is better to spend money on preventative and permanent measures rather than a hospital bill for an asthma attack. "You should not be in the emergency room."

An overall inspiration to African-Americans and women, Wilson continues to break barriers. She is just another shining example that history, color, and gender do not have to dictate your future. "My grandmother was a housekeeper and she worked in the kitchen," she said. "Now my name is on the kitchen."

For more information, visit Wilson's website, www.robinwilsonhome.com.

You can also find her on Facebook at www.facebook.com/pages/Robin-Wilson-Home and on Twitter@rwhome.

Stages

Continued from page 22

An "X Factor" spokesman stated that "no decisions of cast changes will be made until the show ends next month." Personally, I hope that the gifted and lovely singer Rowland does make

the Los Angeles swap with Scherzinger. She deserves nothing less.

SWV TO LAUNCH COMEBACKWITH FORTHCOMING NEW LP SINGLE "CO-SIGN": As a one-time co-manager of multit talented singing group SWV (Sisters With Voices), it was great to learn that this

month, SWV is set to release their first new studio material in nearly 15 years.

A great new photo of the group is the cover art for their new single, "Co-Sign," which is their first release for Mass Appeal Entertainment and follows up their 1997 album, "Release Some Tension." Recently, the '90s

trio—Cheryl "Coko" Clemons, Tamara "Taj" Johnson-George and Leanne "Lelee" Lyons—appeared on the remix of Chris Brown's "She Ain't You" single.

The extremely talented group also took the stage together in Toronto recently at the Amnesia Anniversary concert and performed in Lagos,

Nigeria. A reality show surrounding the group's comeback is also reportedly in the works.

Here's wishing SWV much success when their sizzling new album and hit "Co-Sign" single are released

Here's wishing you and yours a fantastic week ahead.

Forbes

Continued from page 37

African-American senior minister. He left Riverside for retirement in 2007.

At UTS, Forbes teaches a three-point course in teaching and preaching. He previously served as an associate professor there and currently heads up the Healing of the Nations Foundation. Forbes

said that he is ready to take his spiritual message national.

"My primary focus would be to go to national ministry with an emphasis on the spiritual renewal of our nation and a call to health and wholeness," he said. "My ministry will preach in centers to bring us toward social transformation."

UTS President Serene Jones said that Forbes brings a

unique message and that she welcomes him back to where he started his career in the ministry.

"Rev. James Forbes' stature as a proclamatory, public, prophetic and pastoral voice is unmatched in North America today," said Jones. "I am thrilled that he is willing to turn his gifts to the urgent task of preparing the new generation of theological leaders. His gifts and voca-

tion and Union's history and mission are a perfect match."

This past Wednesday, Forbes launched his national ministry of preaching and spiritual renewal at "Spirit Alive" at the James Memorial Chapel at UTS. The event included remarks by seminary presidents and religious leaders across the city. "Spirit Alive" is a series of events led by the minister designed to deepen faith, inspire morali-

ty and compassion and mend divisions across race, religion, class and ideology.

"I'm excited for this opportunity to give the value of my past experience to the nation, to take my country to heart, to love her, to diagnose her malaise and possibilities and to listen for 'a word from the Lord' and find skillful ways to transmit what is needed to transform the nation," said Forbes.

Korner

Continued from page 18

state's residents and immediately repeal the Beason-Hammon Act."

It's also time to address the Jim Crow-like aspect of this law and not be afraid to call a spade a spade. It is undoubtedly racism at its worst and should urgently be slapped down.

The U.S. Supreme Court should agree to hear arguments against immigration laws instituted randomly by any state, not simply the Arizona law; such copycat rules are starting to wreak havoc on our very humane society.

The writer is founder of *NewsAmericasNow*, *CaribPR Wire* and *Hard Beat Communications*.

Dr. J

Continued from page 31

out a fighter every month, the so-called "Bum of the Month" routine. We Black kids were proud of him and his victories. After Louis defeated Billy Conn, that pretty much ended my relationship with my Irish friend.

AN: Now this was in the mid-1940s, right?

Dr. J: That's right, and not only were we rooting for the Joe Louis, "the Brown Bomber," there was Jackie Robinson who had just been signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers and sent to their minor league team in Montreal. Jackie had been playing in the Negro League where my father played, so this was the beginning of breaking the color barrier in the Major League. My father took me

to see him play in Montreal, in Jersey City, in Newark, where the Newark Eagles of the Negro League played.

Because of this, Jackie was my idol, I became him. I even adopted his pigeon-toed walk with my butt hunched up. For two years, Branch Rickey kept him in a strait jacket; he was told not to fight back but to take all the insults, and they threw black cats on the field and called him all kinds of ugly, racist names. But Jackie took it for two years and then broke out in 1949. And Black Americans broke out too. We felt if Jackie could do, so could we. Plus, Jackie had gone to college at UCLA and back then that was my choice.

AN: What about your family and sports? I know you played baseball but what about your parents?

Dr. J: My father was an athlete and so was my mother, who was only 5-foot-2. We still have all of her medals she won. Not only were we an athletic family, but both my parents graduated from high school during the Depression.

AN: How far back does your family go in New Jersey?

Dr. J: My father's people left Georgia in 1919. After three years of suffering through the failure of crops due to the boll weevil, one member of my family made it up to Akron, Ohio, and told the others to come on out of those cotton fields. He told them they could make \$33 a week. They were part of the Great Migration.

AN: I recall you telling an audience that your grandfather was killed by the Ku Klux Klan. Can you recount that tragedy for our readers?

Dr. J: Yes, they murdered him in 1917 in Georgia. He was born in 1868, the same year as W.E.B. Du Bois. What they did to him was similar to what happened to Blacks in Tulsa and in Rosewood—crackers jealous of Black achievement.

AN: Don't you think it's about time you put some of this in a book?

Dr. J: People are always after me to write my story; it has been written and still people don't believe it. They wouldn't believe that Du Bois is connected to our family.

AN: But someone is working on a book about you...

Dr. J: Yes, but she had to stop. Let me give you a taste of what I'm talking about. My mother's great aunt, Pocahontas Foster, became Du Bois' secretary.

AN: Dr. J, I think that's a sufficient tease and good place for us to conclude part one.

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