

# Facing prejudice made her strong, says entertainer

Story: SHIRLEE IDEN  
Photos: MINDY SAUNDERS

Experiencing prejudice makes you grow stronger.

Leslie Uggams speaks from experience.

"I always remember who I am and where I came from, despite my fortunate success," the entertainer said in Southfield last week.

"I faced many difficulties created by my minority status, so I know of prejudice and I believe that by helping one another, Jews and blacks can overcome the senseless hatreds and stand very tall together."

Ms. Uggams spoke at the "Bond Between Us" luncheon sponsored by State of Israel Bonds on Oct. 25. She was awarded a cultural citation by the bond organization for her efforts on behalf of Israel.

In an interview following the presentation, Ms. Uggams said she has raised money for Israel as far back as her teen years at a professional school.

"I've never been to Israel, but I've always wanted to go and it's on my list."

As far as tension between Jews and Blacks, Ms. Uggams said for her there are none. "I don't feel it at all," she said.

"I live in the heart of Beverly Hills, know all kinds of people, and I think all blacks want peace as much as Israel wants peace. We can do without vio-

lence. I'm from the Martin Luther King school."

FOR MS. UGGAMS all schooling began on the streets and stoops of Washington Heights, a section of New York City dubbed by one comedian as "the suburb of Harlem."

Among the hustlers, the heavies and the day-to-day neighborhood people, Leslie Uggams gathered with friends, prepared to sing and dance to impromptu audiences.

"I was always a ham," she admits. "I would sing and dance at the drop of a hat."

To correct her knock-knees and to direct their daughter to a better life-style, Ms. Uggams' parents sent her to a nearby dancing school where her talent was noticed. She tried out in local auditions and talent shows.

At age 6, she made her television debut portraying the niece of Ethel Waters on "Reulah." Later she appeared on the Milton Berle Show, The Show of Shows and children's programs. She appeared regularly at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, famed for being a proving ground for black acts.

With her father working three jobs as a floor waxer, she was able to attend Professional Children's School for show business children in New York.

EXPOSED to two different environments, her own and that of upper-class whites, she found herself in something of a dilemma.

"It was like living in two worlds," she recalled. "On one hand I was attending a sophisticated white school where everything was so proper and smooth."

"On the other hand, I still lived on 64th Street, which can get a little crazy at times. I'd get all dressed for school and then come home, slip on my jeans and go outside and sing with the kids in the neighborhood."

When she was 15, Ms. Uggams submitted a letter to a TV station requesting an appearance on "Name That Tune." She was accepted and also met Mitch Miller who signed her to a recording contract.

Less than a year later, she was a regular on the "Sing Along with Mitch" television program.

Being black, Ms. Uggams faced difficulties on the show despite high ratings. Southern stations shied away from the program because of her color.



Leslie Uggams grew up knowing prejudice and believes it has made her stronger.

She recalls Miller took a stand and faced them down. "If you don't want her then you don't want me," she remembers him saying.

There were more successes in nightclubs and on the stage for the young singer, who also hosted her own television series and starred in a number of TV specials.

Married to producer Grahame Pratt, she has two children a daughter, Danielle, and son, Jason.

IF LIFE and its realities have taught her a lot, she contends nothing taught her more than her role as Kizzie in

Alex Haley's "Roots."

The saga of slavery was a revelation to her.

"I didn't know what my own great-grandmother went through," she said. "I could never get my own grandmother to talk about it. But I learned so much and I thank Alex Haley for that."

"It made me terribly angry and it was painful. I find it difficult to comprehend what one human being can do to another."

Ms. Uggams related that when she did the scene in which she was taken away from her own family on a horse

*"I learned so much from playing Kizzie in "Roots." I never knew what my own great-grandmother went through. It made me terribly angry and it was painful."*

— Leslie Uggams

drawn wagon, the emotions were so extreme, she couldn't even look at Sandy Duncan who played a white woman.

"And we're old friends," she said.

Her role in "Roots" and another in "Backstairs at the White House" have been the highlights of her serious acting career to date.

"I intend to get more involved in acting," she said.

Having won the Critics Choice Award for Best Supporting Actress and an Emmy nomination for Best Lead Actress for her portrayal as Kizzie, she should have no trouble forging ahead to new heights in an already rich career.



LESLIE UGGAMS

**WINDOW CLEANING**

• OUTSIDE ONLY

**\$30 - \$40**

**C & S Window Cleaning**

CALL 459-1556

**ANNIVERSARY SALE**

TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR GRACIOUS AND VALUED PATRONAGE

**1/2 OFF** ON ANY OF OUR FAMOUS DESSERTS

WITH ANY DINNER

Over 22 delicious desserts, including Henry's famous cheesecake, Black Forest torte, chocolate buttermilk cake, double chocolate cake, eclairs, pies, a Napoleon, etc.

Over 20 complete dinners from \$3.95

**10% OFF CHECK**

Over \$100.00

**POINT AFTER DELI**

26400 W. 12 MILE AT NORTHWESTERN

(SUNDAY BRUNCH 10:00-2:00)

(In Racquetline Bldg.)

516-3732

Appearing Now

**MIKE WISE**

Tuesday-Thurs. 7-12

Fri & Sat. 8-1

FOOD TO GO WITH YOUR FUN & SPIRITS

**Schuler's**

GRATE STEAK & SEAFOOD

Ha' Penny Lounge

6066 W. Maple Rd.

W. Bloomfield

851-8880

## Take Advantage Of Your Advanced Youth.

If you're 60 years of age or better, Michigan National Bank-West Metro wants to introduce you to a brand new program which gives you financial freedom and security.

It's called V.I.P. 60 Plus.

What we're offering is a personalized identification card which entitles you to benefits like: Absolutely Free Checking, Free Travelers Checks, Direct Deposits of Social Security, pension and insurance checks, Free Notary Services and much more.

How do you become a V.I.P.?

You already are! If you're 60 or better just stop into any office of Michigan National Bank-West Metro and sign up or phone 421-8200 and get the facts.

**Michigan National Bank**  
**West Metro**  
Serving Livonia and Western Wayne County

