## Facing prejudice made her strong, says entertainer

Story: SHIRLEE IDEN Photos: MINDY SAUNDERS

Experiencing prejudice makes you

grow stronger.
Leslie Uggams speaks from experi-

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

tunate success," the entertainer said in Southfield hast 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 solution. "I've never been to Israel, but I've never been to Israel, but I've newer been to Israel, but I've always wanted to go and it's on my

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

"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 "

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"I was always a ham," she damits. "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-type, MS. Uggams' parents sen ther to a nearby dancing school where her lart was noticed. She tried out in local auditions and talent shows.

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At age 6, she made her television do the Million Berle Show, The Showr of Shows and children's programs. She appeared regularly at the Apollo The-ater 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 a telend Professional Children's School for show business children in New York.

EXPOSED TO two different envi-ronments, 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 at-tending 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."

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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

The saga of slavery was a revenation 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 ex-treme, she couldn't even look at Sandy Duncan who played a white women. "And we're old friends," she said.

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

"I intend to get more involved in act-

ing," 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.

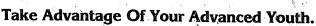


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