

# Soap Opera Star Icon Speaks Out On Hardships of Daytime TV

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*Special to the AFRO*

Spending the first 18 years of her life in the foster care system, Victoria Rowell turned the hardships of her youth into motivation that propelled her to success. With a passion for acting, Rowell moved on a determined path as she landed starring roles alongside Will Smith, Eddie Murphy and Samuel L. Jackson. But Rowell received her biggest break yet when she was cast in the role of Drucilla Winters on CBS' leading daytime drama, "The Young and the Restless." With success in feature films and daytime television behind her, Rowell now has her eyes set on the New York Times Best Sellers List with her first novel *The Women Who Raised Me*.

From the age of 9, Rowell wrote vivid letters to her foster mothers and mentors to keep in touch. Collecting over 500 letters and over 1,000 photographs chronicling her life growing up in foster care, Rowell transformed her written accounts of her life into her first book.

"My mother was unable to raise me, however, because I was shown what her struggles were, I was able to define myself. I understood this woman was unable to care for me and was able to build compassion rather than resentment," she said in an interview with the *AFRO*.

Rowell's book has been 30 years in the making. Her decision to publish was not only motivated by her own personal accounts, but the story of over 500,000 children growing up in the foster care system. Involved in humanitarian efforts and speaking around the nation, Rowell has worked to find ways to incorporate her book in social service efforts for the youth.

"When I bring my message, I talk about being honest with our children, not underestimating a child's abil-



Courtesy Photo

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ity to understand and bridging the gap between parents and children through correspondence and organized visitation," she added. "I was given the opportunity to develop communication with my mother and I think it made a huge difference in my life."

For 17 years, Rowell was able to use her experiences in Hollywood to spread her message to a larger audience. As the years progressed, Rowell's message began to include the racial inequalities within daytime television.

"I take my position in Hollywood very seriously. I've been given an opportunity to spread what I care about. I've also wanted to speak out on the lack of diversity in daytime television," said Rowell. "When you look up and don't have Black writers, producers, hair or makeup people, you have to look up and say 'Why?' Especially when I'm offering

my services and being declined."

As an actress holding 11 NAACP Image awards and yet, no Emmy, Rowell began to feel the effects of being a Black woman within the industry. One of her biggest concerns was with Black actors not receiving their fair share of media promotion on the major daytime magazines.

"I wanted to smash this idea that brown doesn't sell magazines. There are other Black actors who should be sharing in the wealth of that exposure," said Rowell. "If you enjoy the viewership of African-American people, but not allow the African-American actors that draw that audience in to be on the covers of your daytime magazine, there's a disparity."

Rowell conducted an independent study of the number of African Americans on the covers of the two mainstream daytime magazines *Soap*

*Opera Digest* and *Soap Opera Weekly* owned by Prime Media Corp. She discovered that out of 200 covers there had been only about three that featured Black actors. Rowell set up an appointment to meet with executives and discuss the racial disparities and how to improve the presence of Black actors on the magazine covers.

"I have been in the center of a photograph between two White actors and completely airbrushed out and put to the side," said Rowell. "We had also been slated for the Valentine's Prime Media cover, they moved our cover and made it into a White cover. I had to question, is this to say that Blacks don't love on Valentine's day?"

Rowell recalled being on the set of "The Young and the Restless" with eight contracted Black actors with no Black makeup artist or hairstylist to accommodate the various eth-

nic tones and styles. As a result, Rowell hired a hairstylist out of her own pocket whose name she kept anonymous.

"We were doing it ourselves. As a campaign pitch, I hired her for nearly 12 months to prove the difference that it would make to have someone who understood the art of different hairstyles for us as a diverse people."

After hiring the hairstylist, Rowell said none of the other Black actors would sit in her chair and the hairstylist was disrespected on a number of occasions. Rowell and the stylist were separated from the other makeup and hair staff because of what Rowell felt was obvious discrimination.

"They had already told us they didn't want us in the room. We were put in a room other than the company room. I had to lobby behind why is

this Black hairstylist in a room other than the rest of the hairstylists?" Rowell questioned.

"It was fear that we pushing up against the system and not everyone will march down the center of the street. People will clap along the sidewalk but I am going to march down the street when it's something I believe in."

Ultimately, the hired stylist left the set.

"It was clear she wasn't getting the respect that she deserved," said Rowell.

It was only after her announced departure of the show in early February did Rowell see some of the results she had been fighting for. In the last year, Rowell broke ground by being featured on two covers of *Soap Opera Digest*. Rowell's struggles motivated her to change career directions. Her last taping of "The Young and the Restless" aired through May of 2007.

"If I can't bring effective change in 14 years in one place of employment, then I have to try to make that happen myself."

Rowell is currently working on a fiction work titled *Secret Diaries of a Daytime Diva*. She has been pitching the script to major networks Lifetime and Showtime. Rowell ultimately is pushing to get *The Women Who Raised Me* made into a feature film.

