

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Ready to add a big dose of positivity and empowered perspective to your day? You've come to the right place. Welcome to She Said/She Said Podcast. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. Here, we tackle everything from imposter syndrome and confidence building to the best advice on how to lead yourself through life pivots, including the ones that knock you flat. For the past three years, I've talked to hundreds of experts about their stories. Here, you'll find their actionable advice and lessons, as well as my own tools that you can put to use in your own life. Stick around. I think you'll find this investment in you well worth it.

Hi friend. Welcome to She Said/She Said. Today, we're going to be talking about one of the greatest American success stories. It's the success story of Madam C. J. Walker. Now, she was the first Black woman millionaire in America, a washer woman who literally rose to become an international entrepreneur. She also happened to be the first in her family to have been born free after Emancipation Proclamation. It is an incredible, incredible story.

Madam Walker made her fortune by creating a product that she and others needed, but the product actually became the conduit for something that was much more significant and transformational for many women of her generation and that particularly applies to women of color. There are so many things to love about this story. It's a story of grit and determination and paying it forward and tremendous sacrifice.

Today, I'm sitting down with Madam Walker's great, great granddaughter, the amazing A'Lelia Bundles. A'Lelia is joining us as part of our Women's History Month series. Today's conversation isn't just about Madam Walker's story, but it's also about A'Lelia's story, and her dedication to historic accuracy and why that matters. We're going to talk about the recent Netflix series entitled Self Made, which is loosely based on Madam Walker's life and also A'Lelia's book about Madam Walker, which is entitled, On Her Own: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker. The book is fantastic and I highly, highly recommend it.

We'll get A'Lelia's thoughts on the Netflix fictionalized version of her heritage, how she responded to that, and the most important lessons that we can take from that and Walker's story. One of the most enduring lessons that I take away from her story and that I think is so significant as we celebrate Women's History Month is this idea of the power of women helping women. A'Lelia, welcome to She Said/She Said.

A'Lelia Bundles:

Delighted to be here.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I am absolutely delighted to have you. And I'd be delighted to have you under any circumstances, but I'm especially delighted to have you this month during Women's History Month to talk about your amazing family history. Before we get into that, you are incredibly accomplished in your own rights. So I would love for you to start off by telling us just a little bit about yourself.

A'Lelia Bundles:

So I was born in Chicago, but I grew up in Indianapolis, which is where both of my parents were from. I had a really wonderful childhood with lots of opportunities and discovered that I loved writing at a very early age. And that then sent me on a path to a career that led to the school newspapers and then working at NBC and ABC, and now having written four books. And then just a lot of other wonderful doors that opened up for me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. This may sound like a strange question when people hear this, but when did you first become aware of your family history? You have this amazing family history, but was it always something that was ever present? Did you really understand it when you were a child growing up?

A'Lelia Bundles:

I began to discover Madam Walker and A'Lelia Walker and my grandmother May long before I really knew who they were because their belongings were in the bedroom of my grandmother's apartment. My grandmother had died in 1945 when my mother was a freshman at Howard, but when my mother and I would visit her father in that apartment, I would go to my grandmother's room and open up drawers and find ostrich's feather fans and treasures, opera glasses, and things that had belonged to them.

And then my mother was vice-president of the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company. So I would go with her to her office. And the silverware that we used every day had Madam Walker's monogram on it. And our special china had been her china. So I had a sense of these were my grandmother's, but it was really much later that I began to understand just how significant they were in terms of their historical value and importance.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, a big part of your life has been spent on protecting and preserving and telling that story and that your history and your legacy. Maybe talk about when that moment first occurred to you that this was something that you wanted to devote a big part of your life too?

A'Lelia Bundles:

If you told me when I went to college at 18 years old that I would be spending most of my waking hours writing and talking about these great, amazing women, I would have thought there's just no way. My mother and father encouraged me to follow my dreams. I wanted to be a writer. I've pursued a career in journalism versus working in what essentially was the family business. Both of my parents worked in the haircare business, but when I was at Columbia in journalism school, in graduate school, my advisor was a woman named Phyllis Garland, a Black woman journalist first, only black woman on the faculty, first Black woman on the faculty at the journalism school.

And she recognized my name, A'Lelia with unusual spelling. And I think she knew the answer to this question, but she said, "Do you have any connection to Madam Walker and A'Lelia Walker?" And I said, "Yes, that's my family." And she said, "That's what you're going to write your master's paper about." That was the fall of 1975, there were no people knocking on my door saying, "We need this book. We need a story about these women." There were very few books being published about or by African-American women. So it was really Phyll who validated this for me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, it's so interesting to me that that it was such a surprise to you that this is where you've spent your time because these stories are incredible, right? They are part of not only your tapestry, but our country's tapestry. Why was it such a surprise to you? Why do you think it hadn't occurred to you before?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Because during that period of time, the stories of women and people of color were really not taught. They were considered insignificant. And one can say inadvertent. If you are really thinking about the way history is taught and how our history has been written, it was intentional that to undervalue the stories of people of color, to undervalue the stories of women and African-Americans. And so this was certainly not taught in my history books. And it really took, I think, the civil rights movement and the women's movement to put these stories in the forefront.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Yeah. Let's back up a bit and talk about Madam Walker's extraordinary story and talk about how she got her start.

A'Lelia Bundles:

So Madam C.J. Walker was born Sarah Breedlove on the same plantation in Delta, Louisiana, where her parents and older siblings had been enslaved. Born in December 1867, the same to the first child in her family to be born into freedom. But orphaned at seven, moved in with an older sister. Her brother-in-law was so cruel to her. She said she got married at 14 to get a home with her own, a mother at 17 and a widow at 20.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Wow.

A'Lelia Bundles:

But she moved up the river from Louisiana to St. Louis where her older brothers had moved a decade earlier. And it was the Women of the Church, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, who began to mentor her and began to give her a vision of herself as something other than an illiterate washer-woman.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Take me from washer-woman to international entrepreneur. Just the, the bridge and recognizing at this point in time for any woman, much less a woman of color, that is a huge bridge to go from somebody who was literally taking in other people's laundry to becoming a millionaire, a female millionaire.

A'Lelia Bundles:

It totally. When you think this is late 1800s, early 1900s before women had the right to vote, 90% of African-Americans still lived in the South, mostly in the rural South working as sharecroppers. So the only jobs that Black women could get for the most part with the exception of a few school teachers was as maids and laundresses and cooks. But this was a person who had seen some glimmer of hope from the small group of educated African-American women like Ida B. Wells, like Mary McLeod Bethune, like Mary Church Terrell, who had created an organization called the National Association of Colored Women, a national women's organization interested in suffrage just as their white counterparts were, but also interested in social uplift in creating kindergartens and retirement homes.

But those were women in her church. And so she could see there was a path. It looked impossible for someone like Sarah Breedlove, the washer-woman. But as she moved through her journey, her hair began to fall out and she needed to figure out a solution, she needed to figure out a

remedy. And it was the discovery of that haircare product that then allowed her to create a company and then to employ thousands of women.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

The condition that she had was something that was very common to many African-American women at the time? Is that right?

A'Lelia Bundles:

It was actually really common to everybody. It was at a time when most Americans didn't have indoor plumbing, people didn't wash very often and they wash their hair even less often. So they had really horrible dandruff and scalp diseases. So actually they were products of White women were using, they were buying shampoos. CUD Cure was a product that was very commonly used by White customers, but it was something that healed dandruff, healed scalp infections.

But in particular with African-American women, because our hair is more tightly coiled, then it was much harder to open the scalp up and to let the scalp breathe. And so our condition seemed in many ways to be worse. And then people were working in rural areas. They were having to cover their heads with cloth. And so the infections were just really severe. So she was... It was at a time when there were very few available products for women. Cosmetics industry was still just being born, but this was something that she ended up few others before her, had begun to create these really home remedies that they'd been turned into a commercial businesses.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love the idea of product development, but what I love even more is the fact that she began to recognize or saw the opportunity to really empower other women as part of her sales force. Maybe talk a little bit about that. She was like Mary Kay before there was even such a thing, right? People weren't really doing that at the time. Certainly not women.

A'Lelia Bundles:

No, certainly not women. And really you think about people like Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein, they were her contemporaries, as they were starting skincare products and then some makeup for women. That wasn't an entirely new industry. And this idea of women being in business and creating a product that was focused on women, you were just supposed to do that at home. You were supposed to take care of your needs within your family, but to be able to create something that was commercially available was quite unusual.

And I think that because she had been mentored and in some ways empowered by those women of the church, once she started selling her products, and once she started recruiting agents, she saw that, yes, those women, the customers and the sales agents needed a remedy for the scalp infection, but what they really needed was education and economic independence. And so this then became in the same way that Mary Kay allowed women, helped women had their own income, Madam Walker was doing the same thing.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, it's amazing. It's such an amazing story. When you began to dig into this story, what were the elements that surprised you the most because you knew the story growing up, but what surprised you

as you really began to dig in and do the research about her? What were her true secrets of success, if you will?

A'Lelia Bundles:

You're right. I knew the story, but in some ways I knew the story that most people who had heard Madam Walker knew. She made haircare products, she became a millionaire. She was born on a plantation. She died in the mansion. So that's a nice four squares of a story. But when I started really doing the research with the benefit of the incredible Black newspapers of the time, that at that point were on microfilm, now they're digitized, but then I would have to go to Chicago or New York or Los Angeles to actually sit down in a library and scroll through and hope that I found some information.

But as I began to do the detailed research, I began to discover just how much more multidimensional she was. Yes, she made haircare products, but she really did build a national and international business. Thousands of women became her sales agents. Those women created generational wealth for their families. Once she began to make money, she was a patron of the arts who commissioned paintings by prominent Black artists. She always had live entertainment for her parties from some of the most prominent musicians of the day. And then she became a philanthropist giving money to Black schools and colleges and orphanages, and a political activist who was very supportive of the anti-lynching movement.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. When you look back on those lessons, which are the ones that resonate with you most deeply?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Her philanthropy and her political activism. Yes, creating a business, employing thousands of people, that is amazing.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's amazing.

A'Lelia Bundles:

And I know that many people will say, "Oh, isn't Madam Walker the first American self-made woman millionaire?" And that's what many people believe. That's what the Guinness Book of World Records says. But for me, that's an interesting footnote, but it's what she did with her money. That really is the most important thing to me. So that she was giving back to her community. She was making sure people were educated. But also that she had the courage to be politically active, that she, in some ways, she and her friend, Ida B. Wells were politically militant.

This worried her attorney who said, "You need to be very careful about what you say. The government is watching you. They're going to circumscribe your activities." In fact, they did, they denied her a passport. But she was a fearless about this and felt that she could speak out on lynching, that she could speak out on the poor treatment that Black soldiers were getting during World War I. She was not afraid because she knew that her wealth had been created by other African-Americans. And I think she was of the mind that if I can't speak out, then what is the point of this?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. Right. Absolutely. So A'Lelia, I wrote to you when my family and I started watching the Netflix series entitled Self Made, which is very loosely based on Madam C.J. Walker and on your amazing book entitled On Her Own Ground. I've said on this podcast several times and on our Instagram that folks need to read this book. It is absolutely terrific. It is a terrific, terrific history of Madam Walker and so much of what was happening in the world at the time. But back to the Netflix story, it varies dramatically from the truth. I want you to talk a little bit about that experience.

A'Lelia Bundles:

I think that anytime a book is translated, a non-fiction book especially is translated to a Hollywood screen, there's a lot of creative license that's going to happen. And some things are a little better than others in terms of getting at the core of the truth. And in my case, the translation was really pretty stark. I love the fact that Octavia Spencer played the role of Madam Walker. I think every time she comes on screen, she lights it up and she really embodies the tenacity and the courage and perseverance of Madam Walker.

So for that I'm grateful. And lots of people work really hard to make this come forward, and we're very proud to work on it. But I was, I don't know, I guess disappointed is probably a nice way for me to say this that the show runners and the writers decided that they would create a cat fight between two women, between Madam Walker and her competitor and that that would be the center piece of the story in order to heighten the drama.

And I think I was very much thinking I was going to see hidden figures. It was closer to Real Housewives of Atlanta. At the same time, it was entertaining for people. A lot of people now know Madam Walker's name, but I'm also finding myself having to say when people say, "Did this happen? Did that happen?" So I'm having to correct the record because people do believe what they see even though Hollywood Creatives will say, "Well, everybody knows it isn't really true." But people don't really know what's true and what's not true.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. Well, if you had to speculate on why the good people in Hollywood thought it necessary to really dramatize this conflict between Addie Munroe in the series who was loosely based on a competitor. I understand that whose name was Annie Malone. And there was this whole theme of Colorism that runs through this conflict between these two women. But you say that really it just was not part of the story. So why make it part of the story? Why can you speculate on why that would be a theme that folks would feel compelled? The story itself is so interesting and compelling. I'm a little lost. And when I watched the series, I was struck by those moments where it just didn't feel right to me. There were elements of the film that I was like, I have trouble reconciling this in my head. Why do you think they did that?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Well, I think the writer Nichole Jefferson thought that this was a way to tell a story. She doesn't have a lot of Hollywood credits and I think maybe she thought if you honed in on two women competing with each other, fighting with each other, that's a cliched way to go at a story and maybe she thought that would appeal to, I think she was trying very to appeal to what she thought was a younger audience. And I think clearly colorism is an issue, not just in America and in the Black community, we've seen it recently with the interview with Meghan Markle and Prince Harry that they know color skin color, it has an impact on people's lives. So it's not that it's not something that's an important issue to grapple with, but it really didn't exist between the two women.

And so what it did was to create, to add an element. When in fact, these women were both really successful business women, really great philanthropists who had similar products as that were similar to other products that other people had, but they were the two queens of beauty and their conflict was over how they did their business, not about color. And so I think that would have been quite interesting all on its own.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I agree.

A'Lelia Bundles:

It's not the center piece of the story. It really did stay the main relationship and the main conflict. And there's so many other things that could have been developed.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Yeah. You took some heat for the fact that you decided to let people who watched the miniseries make up their own minds as opposed to really talking much more forcefully about the fact that you were very disappointed, heartbroken. Really you've spent all of this incredible time and all of these years working on this story. That's a heartbreaking thing to happen. Maybe talk about why you made that decision.

A'Lelia Bundles:

So I knew that when I was being left out of the conversation. So when the script was being written, I was supposed to be included. I only agreed to the deal because I thought I was going to be included. In my previous options, I had been very much a part of it. But when this particular writer became attached to the product, into the process, we had a conversation and she said she was going to focus on these two women and the fight between the two women. And I said, thinking, this is one of many conversations we'll have. Well, I probably wouldn't make that the centerpiece, I would include it, but not make it the centerpiece. And from that moment on until they had to show me the script, I was really left out of the conversation. So that's really questionable about why that happened, but that's just what happened.

So ultimately, I'd read the scripts, I raised issues. I wrote extensive notes. I said, "Why don't you think about this? Not about that." And so I knew what was coming and I had really tried to warn them. When it came time for shooting, the show runners and the head writer actually did not invite me. When I asked to come, they looked at each other. We were on a Zoom call, a Skype call, and it was like, I thrown a bomb into the room. So I saw I wasn't invited. And then ultimately, two weeks before the filming was done, Octavia Spencer reached out to me and invited me to the set.

And so I went to the set. I had a wonderful. DeMane Davis was directing Octavia Spencer. And Blair Underwood and Kevin Carroll were incredible in the scenes. They were in the people behind the scenes, the costume people to make up people to hear people were all really wonderful. I had a great day on the set. So I could see how hard people had worked on this and how proud they were. And I didn't want to rain on their parade before this air.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah.

A'Lelia Bundles:

So, and I've worked in television long enough as an executive and as a producer that I knew that the politics of that moment or that I could have been just whiny and cranky beforehand, or I could let things unfold in the way they did. And then when I saw the reaction, yes, lots of people were totally entertained, but other people saw through that. And I think I just... Sometimes you have to trust the universe about the truth that it needs to tell.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Absolutely. What impact do you think your experience has on other prominent families who might be grappling with allowing Hollywood, Netflix, whatever, to help them tell their story?

A'Lelia Bundles:

I think it is having an impact. I do have a handful of friends who have famous ancestors, and I know a couple of them are in the process even right now negotiating contracts about how those family members are going to be treated in the scripts. And so they are very aware of the experience I had. And so they know what questions to ask. And then there are other people, there are other producers, other directors, other writers who have a much keener consciousness of this most recent story about Fred Hampton. Fred Hampton's family was very involved. I heard the producer and the Warner Brothers' executive on a Clubhouse Coffee other night talking about their experience. And they talked about making sure that the family was included.

Now, they said there were moments when they wanted to do one thing and the family was uncomfortable with it and they figured out sometimes we're going to agree to disagree. That's fine. If a person is really talented in what they do in Hollywood, sometimes their ideas about how you tell the story and how you get to the emotion is going to be better than somebody who is only there on the periphery. So I trust that process too, but I think ultimately it's, what are your values and how invested are you in trying to get at the truth of the story even if you have to do some creative license at some point?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Is there anything you would do differently if you had to do it over again in terms of how you would negotiate those contracts? I'm not sure how much leverage you have in a situation like that, but are there things that you would do differently and are you advising maybe other families to make sure that they're recognizing the experience that you have?

A'Lelia Bundles:

All of these things are learning experiences. I had a couple freakiest times when I had contracts and it was like, "I learned a lot of lessons and paid a lot of money to a lawyer for those lessons. And I had learned those lessons, but these were some other lessons that I had to learn." I think this is true. No matter what you do in life, there are things you said, "I wish I'd done that differently." But certainly, at that point, there had been about a decade where there were so few movies being produced with African-American characters. Hollywood's Conventional Wisdom was, these projects don't sell overseas, we're not interested. And then there was the April Reign #OscarsSoWhite, and the Success of 12 Years of Slave and the Butlers.

So, now people were calling me again and I talked with three or four different studios. And I went with the producer who seemed to value my book, really loved my book and wanted me involved. But then it got to the point, once it started, once the contract... My contract was negotiated, but once

Warner Brothers and Netflix became involved, I lost control because somebody else was calling the shots.

So yeah, I expect to do other projects and I know that I will, say that I want to meet the writers. I want to look at the writers. I'm working on something now where I am in, but where people have said to me, "We promise you, he will not have that same experience." I think by speaking up, I could have said nothing and just gone along with the program. And I think that is what some people wished that I had done and just say, "Thank you," and just be glad that it got done and that's the end of it. And you just have to deal with it in the same way that the Royal Family told Meghan Markle that she needed to just go with the program.

But I'm at the stage in life where I don't just go with the program that I feel it's important to speak your truth, and not just to speak your truth about an ego thing, but to do it because it's really important to me that these stories be told and that they be told well. And it's important to me because I know the young girls who are doing their reports on Madam Walker, who wanted to watch this program with their mothers, and then when their mothers saw it, they're like, "Ah, not really something that we can let you see." And so that was heartbreaking to me. And so I know that my goal is to tell a good story, to tell an inspiring story and a truthful story.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. Right. One of the things that strikes me that I love about your story, A'Lelia is, and the writing that you've done about what happened with the Netflix folks and your reaction to it and how heartbroken you were, but how you reacted to it in a very thoughtful, dispassionate, direct way not to be hurtful, but to be accurate, and the reasons why you felt that that historic integrity was so important. And we talked about this when you and I talked the email before we met, and then you sent me a couple of articles, which I will include in the show notes for this episode, but when you think about that and recognizing that there's so much emotion involved, when you have a disappointment and a setback like that, where did that agility to really pivot? I really processed this to really think about that and not just react. Talk about where that came from for you? How did you learn to do that? This may sound like a strange question.

A'Lelia Bundles:

Yeah, it's a great question.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

But I think it's so important because so much of the time, it can be so easy to get so caught up in the emotion of something that means so much to you that you inevitably make a decision or react in a way that can be counterproductive. Tell us about how you learned to do that, where that strength and agility comes from for you?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Listen, that is a great question because I will tell you that it's not that I don't think bad words.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I'm glad to hear it. It makes you human.

A'Lelia Bundles:

Oh yes. The privacy of my own home, there are thoughts that I have. But I think that I truly have learned through the years that if you say the first thing that comes to your mind, that you are going to shut down a conversation. And you have to be intentional about your goals and what your tone is. Yeah, actually when I was going through this, I knew it had been a challenging year for me anyway, because in 2019, my father and both of my brothers died within 12 weeks of each other.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh, [inaudible 00:32:37]. Sorry.

A'Lelia Bundles:

So while I was reading these scripts, I was with my brother who had Stage 4 Lung Cancer. My dad had been diagnosed with Lewy body dementia. So there was a lot going on in my life. And I do yoga and I meditate and I find ways to calm myself down. So by the time, within the few weeks before the Netflix series was getting ready to air, I happened to run into a friend of mine who is a coach, a life coach. And I was talking to her and she said, "Let's do a couple of sessions." Some people appear when you need them to appear.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right.

A'Lelia Bundles:

And we did, we had a few sessions and she said, "If this is how this comes at you think about this, think about your tone. What is it that you want other people to take away from this? What is your goal?" And that was extremely helpful to me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Because you were planning for that possibility in advance?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Right.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Yeah, that's such good advice. It's such good advice.

A'Lelia Bundles:

And you see train wrecks.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oftentimes. Yes, you too.

A'Lelia Bundles:

And I learned so much every day from people. I've been gone from my corporate life for a decade and a half. And I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed being a producer being in the mix of news. I'm really glad I'm not doing that right now because this is a really insane time to be in a newsroom. But I was really fortunate

to have both some really bad bosses from whom I learned some great lessons and some really good bosses, people who mentored me, who encouraged me, who gave me opportunities. And along the way, I think I learned how to handle stress and difficult situations. I would also say working in the news and being in an editing room, when you have six seconds to air and you can't fall apart was probably also really good draining,

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Really good training. Another element of this story that I know you are really in the throws of working on right now relates to your great grandmother for whom you are named A'Lelia Walker, Madam C.J. Walker's daughter, and the fact that she is often misunderstood as a character, I think both in the series, but I think in general, people would say there's maybe a less charitable view taken of her. Is that fair?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Yeah, absolutely.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Maybe talk a little bit about her. And also if you're able to, the new book that you're working on, which will be published later this year?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Probably early 2022 because I'm behind.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's hard. It's very hard work. If you can, talk a little bit about her story and the book that you're working on now.

A'Lelia Bundles:

Sure. So I just want a little perspective. When I started writing about Madam Walker during the research, basically what people knew about her was incorrect. She had a hair care company, she became a millionaire and people sit and she invented the hot comb. But that wasn't true. That part wasn't true. So I had to untangle that. And so it's taken me four decades of like, most people don't say that anymore. But I knew going into that that there was a lot that I had to undo that were myths about her. And I feel the same way about A'Lelia Walker. Her story is a very different story that she's been kind of pigeon-holed as Madam Walker made the money, A'Lelia Walker had parties and spent all the money, the [inaudible 00:36:36].

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right.

A'Lelia Bundles:

And of course, no one is that pathetic, and she is complicated and that's what makes her so interesting to me. She was very involved in the early days of building the business with her mother. It was her idea to move to Harlem. That I think is part of the reason that they're still remembered, is that that decision to be in New York, put them in center stage of what was going on in Black America. But she also was the

child of a self-made person is, we can look at any number of really famous, wealthy families now and see how hard it is for that next generation.

But in the process of her trying to find her own identity, she really did become a patron of the arts with an amazing circle of friends, but even people who write about the Harlem Renaissance, that she's usually a paragraph that's repeated over and over again with she had parties and that she really wasn't much of a patron of the arts. But my research and it's an additional decade of research, shows just what an influence she was. Now, she was very different from her mother. So it's not going to be the same story. And there are parts of her that are not likable. So I'm including those too. But all in all, she wasn't original.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I can't wait to read the story. It sounds absolutely fascinating. I know that philanthropy was such a big part of Madam Walker's story and also A'Lelia's story. And she really thought of her first duty. And as you write this in the book as being focused on humanity and she encouraged her sales agents to use their prosperity and influence to help others. I'm so struck by that because I think she was so ahead of her time as it related to philanthropy.

A'Lelia Bundles:

Definitely. Corporate responsibility. She having, I think very much influenced by growing up in the AME Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church with the women who were in the missionary society, with the women who the club who were involved in suffrage and who were involved in social outreach, that she had that as a template for how you live your life. And so it just became, which she had a penny, then she would put it in the collection plate.

So as she became more prosperous, her gifts multiplied, but she really did see philanthropy as something that was important as she moved along the way, whether it was Christmas baskets or Christmas turkeys to people in the neighborhood, in Indianapolis to this \$1,000 gift that she gave to the YMCAs. That \$1,000 gift, when she shortly after she moved to Indianapolis, there was a big fundraising campaign for a Black YMCA. The YMCAs were segregated at that point. She was good friends with the publisher of the Indianapolis Freeman, a Black newspaper who also happened to be the Chairman of the Board of the Black YMCAs. So when there was this campaign to raise money, she gave \$1,000.

And as many times as I've told that story and as significant as it is in all the dimensions that it represents, I don't know what that reason was. What made her stand up in that rally and say, "I'm going to give \$1,000." I don't know what was going through her mind, but once she did it, it really set her on a different trajectory because people wanted to know her story. And then maybe that's the power of a personal story. How had this woman who had been a wash-woman now gotten to the point where she could give \$1,000? Was it just the sense of giving back of charity that she'd learned in the church? Did she also have this idea that she was a master at marketing and publicity that this would get headlines, but for the good of the community? But that's something I have to meditate on that and see if I [inaudible 00:40:41].

I think this is what's so fun and satisfying for me about telling their stories is that I continue to have revelations about them and other people were... I have a good friend, Tyrone McKinley Freeman who's a professor of philanthropy at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University. He's just written a new book called Madam Walker's Gospel of Giving.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh really?

A'Lelia Bundles:

Tyrone takes... Yeah, I met him when he was working on his dissertation a decade ago, and he has drilled down on Madam Walker as a philanthropist and as an educator. And he is a person who grew up in the church is, I think at least maybe his grandfather and a couple of other relatives are ministers, I think his father is a minister. So he has a lens that I couldn't bring to my writing. And he really looks at the history of philanthropy among African-Americans, but he really unpacks who Madam Walker was as a philanthropist within the context of that particular time of the early 1900s.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, absolutely fascinating. So, given what you just said about having these things revealed to you as you do more and more research and as you sit with it and as you meditate with it and you think about it, if you had an opportunity to sit down with Madam Walker and with A'Lelia Walker, what's the question you would ask each one of them, you've got to have things like that \$1,000, maybe put that \$1,000 [crosstalk 00:42:17]. You probably have loads of questions that you're like, "Wow, I wish she had written this down somewhere." What would be those two questions? What would you ask each one of them?

A'Lelia Bundles:

For Madam Walker, I would really like to know about her childhood, what that period was from seven years old when her parents died through 20 when she made the decision after her husband died to move from Louisiana to St. Louis. I would just really love to know what the influences are. I can do the historical context and say, "I know this was going on and Delta, Louisiana," and try to speculate on that. But I would love to know what she thought about that period of her life and what the long-term influences were. With A'Lelia Walker, I would just love for her to tell me about who was at the party.

During the early 80s, there were still a few people who had known Madam Walker who were still alive and a larger number of people who had known A'Lelia Walker and I was able to interview them. And some of the friends, a woman named Jerry Major who had been the Society Columnist for the Black Newspapers and who later was the Society Columnist for Jet Magazine, she had so many great stories to tell. And I interviewed a number. Alberta Hunter, the Blues Singer, I interviewed her and a number of other people. But they were so excited to see me because it reminded them of their friend, then the good times they'd had together.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, that's amazing. Because we are to some degree setting the record straight as it relates to both of these stories to leave our audience with maybe the most enduring elements of each woman's legacy that you want to make sure we don't lose as people work over these stories in whatever way they will. What are maybe the most enduring elements of both stories?

A'Lelia Bundles:

For me, Madam Walker story is a story of women empowering women. She was mentored and nurtured by women who took her under their wing, who saw some spark in this uneducated washer-woman and began to help her see a way forward. And she then turned around and did that literally for thousands of other women. And that the impact was multi-generational, both with the wealth that they created, the

real estate they could buy and also politically because the beauticians who had gone to her convention saw her commitment to politics. So that even up into the 1963 March on Washington, it was the beauticians who helped pay for the buses to go to that march.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Wow.

A'Lelia Bundles:

So there was a long legacy for Madam Walker. And now her story continues to inspire entrepreneurs and business people and little girls who are doing a report. So that's Madam Walker. With A'Lelia Walker, her story for me is the story of trying to find your own identity with a larger than life parent. And that can be played out in many different ways. Your mother doesn't have to be a millionaire in order for you to have that struggle of who you are and what's important to you, but that ultimately, she did find it and it was to be a patron of the arts to enjoy culture as one of her friends, she enjoyed beauty.

So she found some satisfaction in the cultural endeavors of others and in supporting them. And I think that's the mark that she left, that she was able to bring together a wide range of people, European Royalty, African royalty, people from downtown, people from uptown, the writers, musicians, artists, and actors of the Harlem Renaissance who all enjoy being around this charismatic by vicious woman. And that was her contribution to the Harlem Renaissance was her convening and her ability as an impresario to put together great events.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Yeah, I love that. I love this conversation. I am so grateful that you spent time with us today. This is really, really fantastic.

A'Lelia Bundles:

Well, I'm so glad that you reached out. I really ever enjoyed the podcast of yours that I've listened to.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Thank you.

A'Lelia Bundles:

Each topic is different and you've managed to bring out the stories. And I think the share with your audience, there's so many amazing women. There's so many amazing women who are doing incredible things and you have a great canvas to work with.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Thank you. I really appreciate it. Hey friend, to learn a bit more about A'Lelia Bundles and her great, great grandmother, Madam C.J. Walker, check out the show notes for this episode, Episode 144. And remember, if you're enjoying She Said/She Said, I would love to hear from you. In fact, I'd be very grateful for any feedback and thoughts that you have on the content that we're sharing each week, as well as topics and guests that you would really like to hear from. Your feedback makes a huge, huge difference and I'm always grateful to hear from you.

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