



Nia

A PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE

Our perennially favorite actress touches base with her roots in time for her ever-expanding circle of life

*By EISA NEFERTARI ULEN
Photographs by SHERYL NIELDS*

Monday, August 15 Morning Carlisle Bay St. Michael Parish, Barbados

Nia Long wades in the waters, curves her arm under her swollen belly, and lightning strikes the sea. The dark clouds of the storm billow and are beautiful, too far off to harm us. Moments later, another line of power jags from heaven to earth, from the sky to a point in the distance that is miles away.

Sun shines on the beach where we stand, and Nia's 11-year-old son, Massai Dorsey Jr., splashes with his cousins; their laughter is clear and contagious. Nia's mother, Talita Long, smiles at her grandson swimming in the water of her Barbados homeland—and at the belly where her new grandchild kicks through his seventh month in the womb, swimming in a sea that belongs to him alone.

Three generations—grandmother, daughter and grandson—have flown to Barbados for a homecoming, to reconnect with the Bajan family of Trinidadian origins that roots them all in West Indian culture. For Massai, it is his first trip to this island. For Talita, it is her first trip “home” in 10 years. For Nia, it is a kind of baptism, a spiritual renewal.

But this is not the beginning of the story.

Sunday, August 14 Morning Sterling Children's Home St. Philip Parish

Young people hang in the doorway of a wooden cottage that would be a lovely home for any family but is instead a home for children without families. Several kittens snooze in the shade, the mama cat nowhere to be found—even small animals seek refuge here. In-

side, the furniture is faded, the cracked walls need fresh paint, but the place is spotless. The staff is efficient, and local volunteers visit regularly. When Nia arrives, the children are thrilled to be here. She steps onto the veranda and quickly says hello to each adult but lingers over each child. More young people emerge as she crosses into a wide hall, and it becomes clear that her arrival is a surprise for some of them. Twin boys lead her to the backyard. A cluster of trees stands where, we are told, monkeys live and plot mischief. Cane fields stretch just past three smaller cottages, homes for the oldest teens that they themselves helped build. There is another building in the huge yard, and that is where Nia sits in a circle to speak—and listen—to the children.

With her encouragement, one by one, the children stand to give their names, ages and tell what they aspire to become: Girls want to be teachers, hairdressers, scientists. Boys want to be masons, business owners, accountants. Nia encourages entrepreneurship, collaboration, focus. She suggests they plan, complete one task a day to reach their goals, manage their money, and then plan some more.

On this, her first visit, Nia is already planning her return to this place, to plant gardens in the three cast iron tubs centered in the backyard, and to host an event to raise much-needed funds. She says more than once she must return to form a stronger relationship with the children to “really connect with each one of them.” Some of these children may not have known a movie star would be the special visitor of the day. More likely, the big-bellied woman with island girl looks and an American accent sitting right there is so accessible, so much like a special auntie, that they forget. Either way, they are Nia's children now. As she speaks about their futures, about what might just lie ahead waiting for them, they nod in a way that suggests that, with her very presence, they are beginning to process new possibilities.

Nia also tells the young people about her difficult journey to forming a good relationship with her father. And this is the moment she launches a discussion of the one thing she later tells me she shares with all the young people she mentors: forgiveness. She talks about forgiveness opening the door of possibility, about forgiveness as a kind of truth, about coming to terms with the past to move forward. She tells them forgiveness healed her relationship with her father. If that is a key component of her own success, Nia has given these children a gift, their own keys to unlock their own futures; the keys to their own personal power.

After a delicious lunch of chicken, peas and rice, and macaroni salad, the boys disappear to play cricket near the cane fields. Nia sits under a tree and spends time with the girls. One of them is just about as pregnant as Nia is; another's face is bandaged. The circle of young women, looking like the schoolgirls they are, is quiet but animated, sharing secrets with a trusted friend. Something is opening up under this tree, like a circle of flowers revealing each petal. Some of the petals may be bruised, but all are soft and beautiful.

Sunday, August 14 Night Brown Sugar Restaurant St. Michael Parish

A confluence of sounds makes music at Brown Sugar. Whistling frogs sing into the night air. The rise and fall of human voices fill the air, too, as about a dozen aunties, uncles and cousins arrive to break bread with Nia. When she walks in, belly first, down the

*Mother
Goddess*

Hot Mama!

Nia embraces motherhood again. Age, she says, is not an issue.

“You are not half the woman you’re gonna be until you turn 30. So I think if we’d just take our time as women, and do what comes natural to us and for us, we would make fewer mistakes.”

restaurant stairs, she shimmers in an aquamarine tank the color of the sea where the water is still, with silver threads that loop and dance like a mermaid’s hair. They distract Massai, who pulls on them while his mother reminisces with kin.

Like most beautiful women, Nia has a mother who is strikingly lovely. Talita’s locs hang to her shoulders, and she has delicate facial tattoos that the visual artist with a B.F.A., an M.A. and an M.F.A. says started out as sketches. They are “a type of beautification, something that was taken from us during slavery,” she says. Though she had been the first Black woman to work in the graphic arts department at CBS News with Walter Cronkite and

Dan Rather, and had an impressive portfolio of her own fine art, when Talita moved her then-10-year-old daughter from Brooklyn to South Central L.A., she couldn’t find work. She had to go back to school to qualify to teach in the Los Angeles Public Schools, and her drive and persistence—and struggle—have helped fuel Nia’s ambition.

Nia’s aunt Judy Greaves says that there is one family trait they all share: “We’re very determined people. The women are determined and well-educated. And always very focused and know exactly what they want to do and strive to make that goal.”

That certainly describes Nia, our homegirl next door: a sister

simultaneously regal and real, accessible with just the right hint of attitude to keep things interesting. If it felt like just about every Black film made over the past 20 years starred Nia Long, that’s because just about every Black film made over the past 20 years—*Boyz n the Hood*, *Friday*, *Soul Food*, *The Best Man*—did. If Julia Roberts is America’s sweetheart, Nia Long is ours. A woman who has made her career in segregated Hollywood *happen*. A woman whose name means purpose in Swahili.

Monday, August 15 Night Pisces Restaurant Christ Church Parish

She and her mother struggled financially when they moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles, Nia says. Despite that, “Even though we didn’t have a lot, I never felt poor.” Indeed, the actress tells me as we sit where the moon lights a path on the water outside the Pisces restaurant, her mother “made me feel that I was amazing . . . and that there was a space in this business for me.”

But she never behaved like a Hollywood mother. Even today, Talita refuses to take credit for Nia’s success, insisting the “acting thing” was her daughter’s idea. If anything, she’s willing to concede that perhaps the art that surrounded Nia during her formative years might have freed her “to reinvent herself” and “come up with her own ideas.”

Nia chose acting early, and Talita enrolled her in classes taught by Betty Bridges, *Diff’rent Strokes* star Todd Bridges’ mother,

with whom Regina King also studied. Talita says Nia “was always a go-getter, kind of like my mother.”

Nia remembers when her maternal grandmother told her that as a child she was teased and called Black Pearl. “And I thought to myself, ‘But the black pearls are the most precious.’ And she really is.” Pearl, who ultimately owned her own successful hair salon, thrived in the business of beauty despite those childhood taunts, and when Nia was growing up, her grandmother would take her back to Trinidad and Barbados. “She’s 91 years old,” Nia says, “and I really wanted her to be here, but she’s got Alzheimer’s, so it’s a little difficult for her to get around.”

Nia has fond memories of visiting both islands with her grandparents. Her grandfather, who passed away just before Massai was born, was incredibly close to her and feared she wouldn’t be able to support herself as an actress. He told her to put her first \$100,000 in the bank and live off the interest. “I just remember thinking, ‘That’s not gonna work,’” Nia laughs when she remembers his loving but fiscally unwise advice.

Their gift of a strong West Indian heritage still empowers Nia. “I think it’s just part of being an island girl,” she says, “that you

are to be proud. It doesn’t matter how much money you have, it doesn’t matter where you live, it doesn’t matter if you’re married or single: You are to be a proud, whole woman. Not in a way [in which] you’re arrogant, but just in a way [that] you’re content. I am a Black American woman,” she continues as she gestures out the window at the moon lighting the sea, “but the side of who I am that comes from here was highly influenced by the West Indian way of doing things. So although I’m an African-American woman, I think the way I do things is probably closer to the island way than the American way. I never really realized it until I got older and started coming back as an adult. They say the first 10 years of a child’s life are the ones that really shape who they are. Well, that’s when I was here.”

Anyone who’s ever visited the islands knows that within West Indian culture there is a deep reverence for God, and Nia evoked His spirit throughout the trip. She led the family prayer at dinner, invited grace whenever her team broke bread and mentioned God as a powerful force several times when addressing the young people at Sterling House. “The thing is,” she says, “He’s the center of everything, so if you don’t give praise to the core of life, then you can’t really receive all the blessings and gifts that He has in store for you.”

Her pregnancy is one gift about which Nia can testify: “I honestly asked God for this.” She has been blessed not only with the baby but also her partner, the man with whom she sees herself growing old, Ime Udoka. A professional basketball player who most recently played with the San Antonio Spurs and is now a free agent, Ime, whose father is Nigerian and mother is American, is “having his own homecoming” in Madagascar, where he is qualifying to compete in the upcoming Olympic games as a member of the Nigerian national team.

When her gynecologist told Nia during a regular checkup that it might be difficult for her to have children again, she says, “I remember I was driving home from the doctor, and I called Ime, and I was like, ‘Babe, I’m really kind of sad right now.’ And he said, ‘Why?’ I said, ‘Because the doctor actually said if I wanted to have more children, it would be hard.’ And he was just quiet. The next time he came to visit, he said, ‘I don’t believe that.’ I said, ‘You don’t?’ He said, ‘No.’ And I said, ‘Good; me neither.’ Then I got pregnant.”

“Look, this is the deal,” Nia says as she leans in to talk. “The medical [profession] tries to tell every woman, ‘Have your babies before 40 because you shouldn’t have children after 40.’ Society tells us, ‘Get married before 30, because no man wants a woman after 30.’ All of that is just so counter to the cadence of life, to the rhythm of life, to the lessons we have to learn as women. You are not half the woman you’re gonna be until you turn 30. You’re not even half of *that* woman yet. So I think if we’d just take our time as women, and do what comes natural to us and for us, we would make fewer mistakes.”

The power to take her own time is another testimonial for Nia. “My entire life, I’ve prayed for patience and grace,” Nia says, and Ime is the word for patience in his father’s Ibibio language. “When he told me his name means patience, I had a kind of out-of-body experience, because I never knew patience would come in the form of a man.”

And that, perhaps, is the beginning of this story, this journey of a woman back to her ancestral homeland. Perhaps it began when she met the man she says she trusts with her life; the man she says has grounded their relationship in Truth. Their love, perhaps, set Nia’s journey in motion. Love sent Nia back to Barbados, to reconnect and reclaim her past before pushing through a bright new future, a new life on his own journey into this world. **E**