

Regina Bennett (Nate Smith House)

Interviewed by Tommy Pratt & Quintin Johnson (2005)

My full name is Regina Rebecca Abdal-Khallaq-Bennett. That's pronounced 'Abdal Halaq' and in Arabic it means 'worship of the Creator.' My nickname is Gina. I was born December 13, 1952 in Roxbury, MA. My mother's name was Elva Abdal-Khallaq, and my father was Malik Abdal-Khallaq. I grew up in an area where I knew all my neighbors. Unlike today, our neighborhood was like family. For instance, if your Mom wasn't home, you could go to a neighbor's house. And if you did something wrong, you could be sure your Mom was going to know about it! We had two parks to play in, Monroe Park one in front of our house, and Washington Park was in the back.

I grew up in a great nine room house and I have a very large family. I lived with my Dad, and Mom, and I have nine brothers and sisters, but I'm number 8, so when I was growing up my older brothers and sisters were already gone, so only five of us were living at home. My brother Abu only lived with us until I was about five years old, then he got married and had his own family. So, my oldest brother is Abu, the next one is Sharif, next is Saafa, the next one is Mustafa, the next one is Jumaada, then Jacob, then Hamida, and the next two are twins — Yvette and Yvonne. The twins are the youngest. Out of 10 children, the last four were all girls. We had a little toy poodle named Inga; we kept one of her litter, and we called it Baby. We had a cat, but I don't remember the cat's name.

My school was within walking distance of my house. I went to public school up to fourth grade, then I went to parochial school to the tenth grade. Later I finished one year of college. After college, I had my son, Jamal (in 1974), then I basically worked in my family's business — Nubian Notion — for the last 35 years!

I didn't like school very much. I can't recall getting a big bang out of school ... rather than just going there and learning what I had to learn. I mean I wasn't bad in school or anything like that, but I just did what I had to do.

My favorite seasons are Spring and Fall because I don't like cold and I don't like hot! My favorite colors: red was my favorite before I got married, and purple after I got married! My husband's name is Devon Bennett.

I like all kinds of music, but I'm partial to R&B ... but I really like all kinds. As I was growing up I was able to inter-mingle with people from different cultures — African, Saudi Arabian, Jamaican, Haitian, Trinidadian, so I like all of those kinds of music. No, I don't play any musical instruments. I think my favorite song is So Amazing by Luther Vandross.

OK, when I was younger than twelve, I played a lot with my sister who was three years older than me. There were also a couple of girls from our neighborhood that I also played with. We would do double-dutch and stuff. But we were nothing like you kids

are today ... I was practically still making mud pies when I was twelve!

On Friday nights, my mother would let all the girls in the neighborhood come over, and we would pop popcorn and watch The Flintstones and The Jetsons, for about two to three hours! That was fun! Sometimes we would go to the drive-in with my parents, but we weren't allowed to do much by ourselves — without adult supervision.

When I was seventeen, I was living in Texas (with my sister), so I was far away from my friends. I lived there during my last two years of high school, and it was the wrong place for me to be. Texas was rebel country, and I was all militant and Black Power. You know who Angela Davis is? The Black Panther Party? I was into that — you know "Power to the People!" I was living with my sister, so I would take care of her kids after school. I didn't have a lot of social life since most my friends lived on the other side of town. You had to take two buses to get there!

No we didn't really get out much when we were your age. My mother wouldn't really let me go to parties because she was from the old school. You couldn't go anywhere unless you had an invitation, and they would take me and pick me up. And I didn't dare sneak out, because I was petrified of my father. I remember one time when I came home from Texas and my mother told me to be in at a certain hour. I had graduated from high school and was getting ready to go to college. I stayed out until about 5 o'clock in the morning, and when I got home, my mother was sitting out on the porch waiting for me! I didn't get to go to parties and all that until I was in college.

Yes, I would get in trouble with my parents, especially my Dad. He was always the one to tell me to clean up my room before you go to school. So one day I came home after school with my friends, and he was home. It was his day off. And he called me over and he tore me up with his belt — I was running all over that room! And he broke his belt because it snapped in half. So he went upstairs to get a new belt. My friends snuck out the door because they didn't want to be around.

The best jobs I've ever had were the ones I volunteered for. I never enjoyed any of the jobs I got paid for! I was a candy-striper hospital volunteer, and I was a Big Sister. I use to usher at the Strand Theater as a volunteer, I use to work with seniors, too. But any of the jobs that I got paid for, it was just a job, nine to five, go in, come out.

When I was young, one of the things that I remember was President Kennedy dying. I wasn't a teenager yet, but that was a big event. Oh, and we went to the World's Fair in New York or New Jersey. When I was young, I didn't feel like the events going on in the world had any effect on my life, but now I do! I wasn't here during the depression or the Second World War, but the 60's I remember Afros and the Black Power Movement just getting ready to move into place. I remember all that!

We had the normal illnesses that kids get like measles, chicken pox, German measles, and sicknesses like that. If someone was sick when we were kids, the doctor would come to our house. We wouldn't go to the hospital unless one of us was very, very

sick. Like my twin sisters got lead poisoning from eating the paint on the window sill, and they had to go to the hospital.

A story about learning to drive a car? My brother-in-law taught me how to drive when I lived in Texas with them. When I went to take the test, I was so nervous that when the man told me to take a right, I took a left up into somebody's driveway. When I was little, anytime we went to go somewhere in the car with the whole family, my sisters would get car sick and throw-up all over the place. That wasn't much fun!

The first time that I flew on a plane was an adventure. I've always been a heavy person, and when I went on the plane, my sister said that the plane was going to come down because I was so big. I was scared to death to fly on that plane. I haven't had too many adventures, but my first big adventure was going to Colorado to visit my granddaughter for the first time ... when she was a baby.

My best accomplishment? Everything that I do is an accomplishment because I always learn something by trying something new. But I think that having my son Jamal was my greatest accomplishment because I carried on legacy of my family. He's like another piece of the house that's being built.

The hardest thing I ever had to do in my life? That was to stand in front of my Mom while my Father told her that I stole some money from his room. Hurting her was the worst thing I could ever do. That was really hard.

What do I look forward to when I get up in the morning? Well, I'm happy to open my eyes and see another day! And, seeing people that I normally see everyday, and that they're doing OK. Being able to say good morning to my Mom. The most happiness I get is being with my grandchildren and my Mom. That gives me the most joy. My best friend is my mother. She's the best friend I could ever have!

Well, my advice to you would be that if you pray for something, in God's time you'll get it. I learn it the hard way. The person that I am now is because of my family, my parents, and the way they raised me. And, it's because the people who are around me, keeping an eye on me and keeping me in check.