



# Standing On Firm Ground

Prof. Stephanie Evans finds comfort in her work knowing she's on a foundation laid generations ago by sisters who broke barriers for respect in academe.

Life as a military brat has its pluses and minuses, says Stephanie Evans, who in her elementary school years moved from California to Germany and Illinois before settling in Arizona, where she attended middle and high school. On the plus side, one gets to experience new places and meet new faces every so often. That can be enriching. On the minus side, one never stays long

enough to catch root and call one place home. "We did not stay in any place long enough for me to develop roots or a true community of folks who I'd known for a long time," said the assistant professor of black studies at the University of Florida. But whatever the itinerant existence might have deprived her Evans sought between the pages of books, which became her constant companions.

# Academic reaches back in stretching forward

What prompted University of Florida assistant professor Stephanie Evans to write a history of black women scholars?

"Because there was no such book for me when I was a young woman," says the former military brat who grew up in so many different places, sailing quickly through several school districts that she regrets missing the step by step scholastic guidance that comes from being in one place over time.

But that was by no means an impediment because it seemed rather prophetic that Evans, 38, who was considered an at-risk child, would grow up to become an author.

Her interest in words was sparked at a young age through the Reading Is Fundamental program that provided books free to children.

In the 7th grade she selected the ulti-

mate reference guide for the language as her first book because she said, "I figured the dictionary had all the words the other books had." Later, when she read the autobiography of Malcolm X, she was fascinated by his story and completely identified with his passion for words.

So it was natural that when Evans, who admittedly started late on the higher ed track, began studying the lives of black women who broke barriers clambering to the top of the ivory tower, she would eventually share her discoveries with readers.

And that she has done in *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954, An Intellectual History*, which is reviewed below.

Though in her formative years she didn't stay for extended periods in one place because of her stepfather's Air Force assignments, Evans savored the short times when she made a connection

with teachers. One she singles out as a principal mentor is Pamela Copley, her middle school dance teacher during the early 1980s at Utterback Jr. High for the Arts in Tucson, Ariz.

"I may have been at-risk but Ms. Copley treated me as a superstar," Evans says in her tribute to Copley, who died of cancer in 1999.

Her love of books, the fascination with discovering who preceded her in black academe and the spark to share her knowledge combine to produce a teacher who is passionate about learning and is a feisty activist for fair treatment of minorities.

She is far from pleased with the state of black studies and advocates for more doctoral programs in that discipline.

Evans shares some of her own history and ambitions and thoughts on life in excerpts of an interview that begins on the next page.

## Relishing a gift from the past

*Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954, An Intellectual History*

By Stephanie Y. Evans

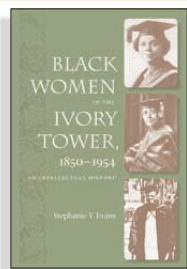
University Press of Florida \$59.95 288 pp

In 200-plus pages, Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans delves into the broad history of higher education and black women in America between the Civil War and Civil Rights movement.

She tackles educational attainment and intellectual legacy.

**A review by  
PHYLLIS BAILEY**

She looks at the social and intellectual walls that had to be knocked down to gain access to institutions of higher learning. She discusses how these women brought back what they had learned to their communities to open schools and to teach, and in so doing profoundly affecting the social and economic dimensions of those places.



Integration (both by gender and race) is examined, as are the roles of historically black colleges, Greek organizations and honor societies. There are dozens of profiles, lots of historical references and plenty of anecdotal data here.

But the focus is on Dr. Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune and their activism for and shared belief in intellectual growth as a basic human right.

Evans writes that, in 1892, Cooper "linked educational attainment to economic and political advancement" in *A Voice*

*from the South: By Black Woman of the South*. Born a slave, Cooper earned degrees in mathematics from Oberlin College and a doctorate from the Sorbonne University in Paris. Her long teaching career started 10 years before the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling that legalized segregation and continued even as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.

Of Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Evans writes, she "saw women as central to education, taught as a community-based activity, and believed that universal education was the foundation of a strong democracy." Born the 15th of 17 children, Bethune's parents and older siblings were slaves before emancipation. In her early years, she picked cotton and attended a Methodist mission school. She went to Scotia Seminary in North Carolina on a scholarship, graduating in 1893.

Evans quotes Bethune's 1926 essay "A Philosophy of Education for Negro Girls": "Early emancipation did not concern itself with giving advantages to Negro girls. The domestic realm was her field and no one sought to remove her... Only those with extraordinary talents were able to break the shackles of bondage....if they were given a certain type of intellectual training."

These women and scores of others like them kicked down the doors to academia for those of us who followed them. It's a gift to have their stories told in such a thoughtful, organized and well-documented book.

—Phyllis Bailey is a copy editor for the *St. Petersburg Times*.



**Q.** Talk a little about your early years and explain what life was like.

**A.** Growing up as a military brat was wonderful in some ways and awful in others. My stepfather was in the Air Force, so we moved to California (six months), Germany (three years), and Illinois (three years), between the time I was 6 and 11. Then we moved to Tucson, Ariz., where I spent my middle school and high school years.

The best aspects about moving around was that I got to see different parts of the world, make new friends, learn another language at a young age, and get over any xenophobia that might have occurred from living only in the United States.

Traveling expanded my mind and heart. The down side was that we did not stay in any place long enough for me to develop roots or a true community of folks who I'd known for a long time. I still have a few connections from way back when, but most folks from my childhood are simply pictures in my scrapbook ... frozen in youth and lost in time.


I was the youngest of three. My childhood had up and down sides.

**Q.** At what age did you realize that you were black and might have begun to feel the different treatment inflicted by the majority society?

**A.** We left D.C. when I was young, so I don't have many memories of race there. There were a few incidences when I was in Albuquerque that I observed which let me know I was black. Most had to do with watching my sister whip someone's behind because they called her nigger.

When we moved to Germany, I was treated as "special" by the Germans around town ... they would always call me cute names and give me German apple pancakes or chocolate. Many had not seen black children before, so I was a novelty. The one time I was called nigger in Germany was by a white American girl — Denise Dodd — who was the daughter of a high ranking officer. She thought she was above the law. She wasn't.

We lived in areas that were predominantly white, so I learned to "blend in." When folks told me, "you're not like the other black girls," I used to take that as a compliment. I soon learned that it was an insult to me and to black girls everywhere. Inevitably, because I moved around so much, I was always seen as different — and, essentially, I was either

A portrait of Stephanie Y. Evans, a Black woman with her hair in braids, wearing an orange textured sweater. She is standing with her arms crossed in a well-lit indoor space with a staircase in the background.

Stephanie Y. Evans  
is assistant profes-  
sor in African  
American Studies  
and Women's  
Studies at the  
University of Florida.

## Biograph

**NAME:** Stephanie Y. Evans

**AGE:** 38

**PLACE OF BIRTH:** Washington, D.C.

**EDUCATION:** B.A. Interdisciplinary studies, California State University Long Beach, 1999; M.A. African American Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2002; Ph.D. African-American studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2003.

**ACADEMIC CAREER:** 2003-present, assistant professor University of Florida; 2002-2003, assistant director of youth education, Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University; 2000-2002, graduate researcher/project assistant, Office of Community Service Learning, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; 1998-1999, assistant to the director, Community Service-Learning Center, California State University, Long Beach.

**HOBBIES:** "In my free time (what little there is these days) I love to shoot pool."

**FAVORITE MUSIC:** "My favorite CD right now is Lupe Fiasco (not only because he

features my favorite artist Jill Scott). He is a real lyricist and the beats are nice."

**READING LIST:** "For work: Francille Wilson's *Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Scholars, 1890-1950*. For play: James Baldwin's *The Price of the Ticket*."

**DIVERSIONS:** "After not taking a real vacation for 10 years, I went to Italy last August. The food (anything with wine and cheese), the shopping (window shopping for me), and the dancing (ever tango with an Italian man?) were divine."

**MONEY:** "I hate the stupid things that people do with it and for it."

**AFRICA:** "...is full of human (cultural and spiritual) wealth but the legacy of colonialism is an ever-present barrier to realizing the continent's full richness."

**POVERTY:** "is preventable. All we must do is relinquish our greed."

**REPARATIONS:** "...are more useful (and needed) than apologies."

**SPIRITUALITY:** "...is missing from so many people's hearts...you can see it in the work of their hands."

**WEB SITE:** [www.professorevans.com](http://www.professorevans.com).

too "black" for white friends or too "white" for black friends.

**Q.** Being a woman and being black sometimes is characterized as a double minority, which ostensibly gives you an edge over black men in dealing with the majority society. How does that play out in real life, if it does indeed?

**A.** The race and gender combination is definitely real. I'm not sure that being a woman is a "bonus," especially considering the disproportionate levels of violence against black girls and women, which I can personally attest to.

Ultimately, it is unproductive to say

that either black men or women have it worse — there are definitely gendered aspects of race, both of which need to be addressed.

To say that the issue of black men in prison is more or less important than domestic violence against black women is to fall into the divide-and-conquer trap. We must be about each others' business. For example, there are many more black women than black men in college, but there are many more black men in faculty and administrative numbers (who are also paid much more than women). We must work to improve all areas.



**The TEACHER:** "I look forward to being a part of the future academy that studies race seriously and critically so that we may better deal with race in society and politics."

**Q.** *Having examined the lives of exemplary black women and overlaying it with your knowledge of the role of gender in contemporary culture, what do you think of the women's movement, especially as it relates to black women?*

**A.** That is a very broad question. There are many women's movements that have complex relationships with black empowerment, labor, student, and anti-war movements.

**Q.** *When you look back, what stands out in your life?*

**A.** The three best times of my life were when I won the Miss Black Teenage Arizona pageant; when I was hooded for my doctorate; and the night I had my book signing party for *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*.

Each night was the result of much hard work and character-building effort. My mentors, (my sister, Pam Copley, Cheryl Arnold, and Professor John Bracey), all offered me a glimmer of hope and encouraged belief in myself. These few instances where I was a "winner" helped me deal with the multitude of times that I was abused, ignored, rejected, or told I

would never make it. Each subsequent victory has given me the will to continue and the energy to invest in supporting other people's quest for success.

**Q.** *Talk about values. What's important to you?*

**A.** Love is my number one value. It is very difficult to do on a consistent basis. Loving people does not require that you agree with them ... or even like them. But in all I do I try to keep that at the forefront of my mind and the tip of my tongue.

Balance is another personal value. I have always been driven — moving out at 16 years old, always working two or three jobs, hustling, struggling, fighting, learning, and striving. But I have had to learn that I need peace to balance that passion — or I will burn out. There also must be balance between work and play. I am working on that part now.

**Q.** *Military families who are assigned overseas often perceive the United States from a different perspective upon their return. What was the experience like for you?*

**A.** For me, the travel was great. But I

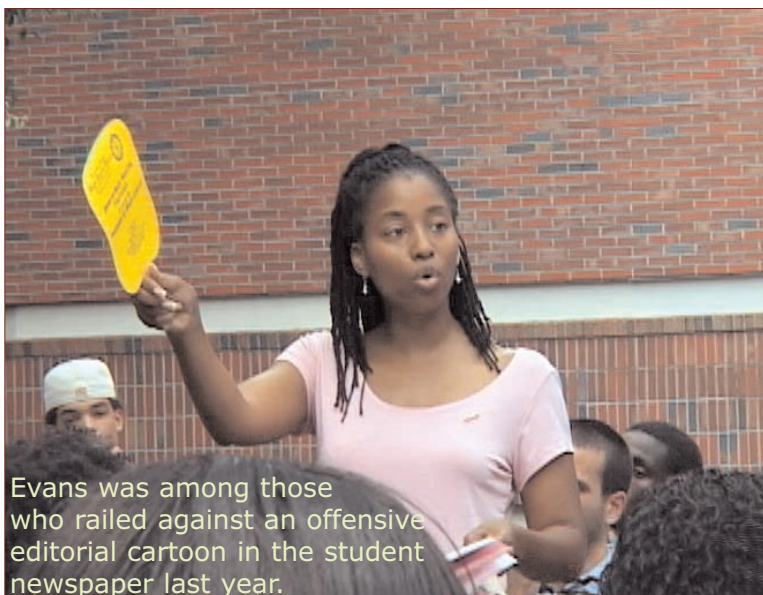
am fully anti-war. There has got to be a way to promote world travel that does not involve militarized relationships.

**Q.** *Have you reached the pinnacle? Where are you going from here?*

**A.** God willing, I am just getting started. I think that my book is of great importance to changing higher education for the better. There is much research to be done about black women's intellectual history, so I look forward to my own work and to collaborations with graduate students.

African American studies is gaining steam as doctoral programs emerge, and they will be at the forefront of race studies in this country. I look forward to being a part of the future academy that studies race seriously and critically so that we may better deal with race in society and politics.

On the other hand, I have definitely arrived. My book is a great history. Not because I wrote it, but because the women in the story are great. If I never write anything else, I am satisfied that *Black Women in the Ivory Tower* will be my legacy. \*



**The ACTIVIST:** "If I were a doctor assessing the condition of University of Florida in terms of its multicultural health (diversity), I would say that UF is anemic.

"...This definition is appropriate in describing UF's dire need of faculty of color. There are two ways that this absence takes place: 1) physical diversity, and 2) diversity of curriculum. The numbers for black faculty are low, but so are the numbers for Hispanic and Native American faculty. There must be an increase in the number but also an institutional commitment to grow programs — African American studies, Native American studies, Hispanic-Latino studies, and Asian American studies (in addition to women's, Jewish, and Middle Eastern studies).

"...This is vital to the overall intellectual health of the University of Florida or other schools."

Evans was among those who rallied against an offensive editorial cartoon in the student newspaper last year.