

THINGS TO DO

Howard resident, author Pamela Woolford tells the untold stories of black Columbia



Doug Kapustin / Baltimore Sun Media Group

Pamela Woolford, a Howard County-raised artist, is working on a book, part memoir and part appendix of influential black people who have lived in Columbia. She often writes in cafes downtown, within walking distance of her home.



By **ANA FAGUY**

PUBLISHED: February 19, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. | UPDATED: February 19, 2020 at 4:21 p.m.

This is the third in a four-part series of articles about black and African American Howard County leaders in celebration of Black History Month.

Pamela Woolford was captivated by stories when she was growing up.

At bedtime, she would push her mother, the Rev. Sadie Woolford, to read another story, and another, and another.

“I thought she was avoiding bedtime, but I soon learned she was really fascinated with stories,” Sadie Woolford said.

2023/24 STANLEY CUP ODDS	
OILERS	+700
AVALANCHE	+750
BRUINS	+750
RANGERS	10/1
PANTHERS	10/1
HURRICANES	10/1
STARS	11/1
GOLDEN KNIGHTS	13/1

SIGN UP FOR OUR FREE E-MAIL NEWSLETTER "THE VSIN DAILY" WITH MARKET REPORTS AND BET GUIDES

When Woolford was a child, she attentively listened to the intricate details of stories; as she got older, she learned how to tell stories herself, in every shape and form.

Sadie Woolford, now 83, recalled a time when her daughter was in middle school and so engrossed with the art of storytelling that she decided she wanted to interview a family friend from Jamaica.

Pamela Woolford, who identifies as black, knew the friend had a story, and she wanted to tell it.

Pamela Woolford, left, and her mother, Sadie Woolford, are shown in an episode of their scripted vlog “Truth & Story.”

“I thought she was very bold because she was just a child,” her mother said. “She was very bold in her approach in finding out about other people’s lives.”

Pamela Woolford, now 52, lives in her childhood Columbia home, the one her parents purchased in 1970. She works as an interdisciplinary artist and a multidisciplinary storyteller with a new book, “Disrupt/ed (a mem-noir),” set to come out this fall at the new Busboys and Poets opening in downtown Columbia later this year.

“We as human beings, we as a species, survive on storytelling,” Woolford said. “[Storytelling] is how we form bonds with people. The human brain is hard-wired for learning through stories.”

And she's on a mission to tell the untold stories of Columbia.

Columbia in the 1980s, the fight for MLK Day

All across the United States in the 1980s, black students were marching and protesting to make Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a holiday.

Woolford, a high schooler at the time, was one of those students.

Her parents, both founders of St. John Baptist Church in Columbia, organized marches in the community in an effort to show support for the federal holiday.

“We would march down Little Patuxent Parkway to campaign for the holiday,” said Sadie Woolford, who still works at the church as an associate pastor for pastoral care. “Pamela would join.”

The fight to create the holiday started in 1968, just four days after King's death, when U.S. Rep. John Conyers, a Democrat from Michigan, spoke on the House floor to push for a federal holiday.

Sadie Woolford, who identifies as African American, described the effort as a grassroots movement that caught fire all across the country, but it was an effort that took time.

Pamela Woolford recalls classmates at Wilde Lake High not going to school in protest and parents not going to work.

She recalled one Wilde Lake teacher purposely making a test on that day. “[The teacher] said, ‘If you don’t take this test, then you do not pass my class,’” Woolford said.

In 1983, after years of black Americans pushing for the holiday, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill designating the third Monday of January a federal holiday honoring King. It took three years before the holiday was observed, and it wasn’t until 2000 that every state joined in.

Getting creative

In the early 1990s, Woolford returned to Columbia after exploring the East Coast, ready to figure out her next steps. She was bouncing around ideas with friends when [the idea for Jambalaya magazine came about.](#)

Paula Richardson, 52, of Columbia, had known Woolford since they were 5 years old. They were next-door neighbors growing up and eventually became business partners working on the magazine.

Woolford and Richardson — along with Carolyn Greer and Kristen Radden — decided to start the magazine in 1992, profiling people of African descent in Howard County, with a focus on the arts. The magazine included everything from question-and-answer to poetry to cooking. When they started, the four women divided tasks; over time as roles became more defined, Woolford became editor-in-chief.

“The purpose of the magazine was to spotlight people of African descent in a diversity of fields and also in a diversity of ethnic backgrounds,” Woolford said.

Richardson, who identifies as African American, said there was a real desire at the time for content that focused on communities of color in Howard County.

“[Jambalaya] was important because it was something that would encourage other artists who thought they didn’t have a voice or didn’t have an outlet to share their art with the community,” Richardson said. “They didn’t have the platform, but we gave it to them.”

For five years, the four women told stories about Afro-Caribbeans, Africans, African Americans and all those who identified as black in Howard County. They reached a peak distribution of 8,000 before ultimately shutting down in 1997.

“We were really keyed into the idea of role modeling and, so, in just seeing yourself in all sorts of different kinds of endeavors and the success of people who look like you, speak like you, lead lives like you and seeing that celebrated, that’s the root of what [the magazine] is all about,” Woolford said.

Telling Columbia’s story in 2020

In November, Woolford competed against eight other finalists [in the second Changemaker Challenge](#), pitching ideas for social innovation in Howard County. Woolford’s idea: telling the stories of black visionaries in Columbia.

As one of the winners in the event co-hosted by the Horizon Foundation and United Way of Central Maryland, she took home \$10,000 for her plan of ensuring those local stories got passed on in a permanent form, not just from one black family to the next.

“Columbia has a history that is told and retold, but it’s always told and retold in a very similar way with the same stories of the same individuals, and there’s so much missing,” Woolford said in November after she won. “And I didn’t want it to die with the people that were no longer with us.”

“Disrupt/ed (a mem-noir),” Woolford’s latest project, is separated into two parts. The first details Woolford’s life in Columbia as a planned, integrated community in the 1970s. The second portion profiles Columbia’s black freedom visionaries, something Woolford said was made possible by her Changemaker prize.

“I would have all these memories of these black people who were my parents’ friends and people they know and know of and work with and were organizing with and different groups they were active with, and there were just these incredible really powerful stories of people who today are doing such amazing things and had a national and sometimes international effect,” Woolford said. “I don’t hear people telling the stories of the people I remember and the people I knew of as a child.”

With the prerequisite that Columbia has had some role in shaping their lives, Woolford will feature stories about 20 black visionaries, including Oprah Winfrey, who lived in Columbia when she started her first talk show.

Pamela Woolford was a winner of the 2019 Changemaker Challenge. At right is Franklyn Baker, president and CEO of the United Way of Central Maryland, which co-hosted the event with the Horizon Foundation.

Woolford said people like Bree Newsome, the woman who scaled the flagpole at the South Carolina State House in 2015 to remove the Confederate flag, deserve to have their story told.

“She is a freedom fighter,” Woolford said of Newsome, who attended Oakland Mills High School in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Walt Carr, 87 and a Columbia resident for 43 years, is doing the illustrations for Woolford’s latest project. [Carr, a black political cartoonist](#), called Woolford’s project essential.

“There were some shakers and movers, and there are today, and they should be documented,” Carr said. “Those visionaries and black icons should be noted; it’s part of Columbia’s history.”

He said Woolford’s long exposure to Columbia makes her the perfect teller of these stories.

“It’s the same stories that are told and retold, and there are black stories that are told and retold, like the story of Martin Luther King; that’s the one story we heard about in school when I was a child,” Woolford said.

“So many stories are missing when you’re talking about black people, even in Columbia. There are so many more stories, and they are very powerful stories, and they are very empowering stories. And I think it’s important for not just black people to hear these stories, but for everybody to hear these stories.”

On Black History Month

According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2014 to 2018, Columbia is a majority-minority community, meaning the population is more than half social, ethnic or racial minorities, with a nearly 26% black or African American population. Columbia had a total population of more than 99,000 in 2010, according to the most recent census data.

That number brought a large smile to Woolford's face.

Four women from Howard County published a new magazine in 1993 titled Jambalaya, which spotlighted people of African descent in Howard County. From left, Paula Richardson, Pamela Woolford (managing editor), Carolyn Greer and Kristen Radden stand around a computer and discuss the premiere issue.

“I’m pleased that Columbia is blacker and blacker because I think [Columbia] has incredible assets. It has a lot to offer, and I love the fact that black people get the benefit of that,” she said. “I love the blackening of Columbia.”

That’s far from Woolford’s reaction growing up. She recalls growing up perturbed by the way the U.S. handled the legacy of enslavement.

“What [enslavement] does to a people, the fact that laws change and not much else changes and you’re expected to catch up. I’ve always felt the need to address black people in particular because you can’t just say enslavement is over and then wait and say things will be different,” Woolford said. “Much of my art has to do with exorcising the legacy of enslavement.”

The separation of black and American history is also something that Woolford wants to see change. She’s hoping her book will do just that.

“The thing about America is we still separate our history,” she said “I understand the reason we talk about black history is because it’s left out, and so my hope is to have these stories to be part of the cannon of our collective memory as well. They’re part of my memory, and I would like them to be passed down and be part of everyone’s memories.”

However, Woolford knows her book alone cannot change the deeply ingrained and systemic problems Howard County and the country face when it comes to race.

“It is even deeper than what you see; it is even deeper than what I feel ... the bigotry against blackness shows itself in all of our lives, 24/7, every single day, even the blackest of us, even the most liberal of us. It affects us all,” she said.

New Study: Dark Spots Are No Match For This Genius DIY Solution

Gundry MD | Sponsored

Buying Nvidia in 2024? Wall Street Legend Issues Urgent A.I. Stock Warning

Chaikin Analytics | Sponsored

The Horrifying Truth About CBD

Tommy Chong's CBD | Sponsored

Tinnitus Discovery Leaves Doctors Speechless (Try Tonight)

Cortexi | Sponsored

Buying Nvidia? Wall Street Legend Issues Urgent A.I. Stock Warning

Chaikin Analytics | Sponsored

Do You Know What Plaque Psoriasis Is? (Take A Look)

Plaque Psoriasis | Sponsored

Target Shoppers Say This Drugstore Wrinkle Cream Is Actually Worth It

Super C Serum | Sponsored

Want To Pee Faster & Stronger!? Try THIS Crazy Prostate Technique

Healthy_Guru | Sponsored

The New Mazda CX-50 Will Leave You Flabbergasted - Take A Look!

Mazda CX-50 | Sponsored

Plaque Psoriasis Is Silent But Deadly - Know the Signs

Plaque Psoriasis | Sponsored

At 53, This 2 Minute Routine Helped Me Transform My Appearance

DERMAL | Sponsored

This Is The Highest Rated Hearing Aid In The US

hear.com | Sponsored

The All New Mind Blowing Chevy Silverado Is Finally Here (Take a Look)

New Silverado | Sponsored

2020 > February > 19