

# Graham Wants People to Find Their Voice

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Martinsville native Juanita Preston Graham may have left Martinsville when she went off to college but she is now accessible in Martinsville again through her new poetry book.

Graham is a 1987 graduate of Laurel Park High School. She then attended the College of William & Mary (W&M) to graduate with a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1991, attended one year at Johns Hopkins University and finished her master's degree in education and agency counseling back at W&M, finishing in 1995.

She still has family in Martinsville: her mother and father, Cleo and John Preston, who live in Laurel Park; her sister, Zena Smith; and brother-in-law Robert Smith. Her sister is a minister at Jerusalem Christian Church and husband is pastor of Jerusalem Christian Church.

Her husband, Willie Graham Jr., and her daughter, Makenzie Graham, live with her in Newport News.

She grew up attending Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church where her grandmother, the late Clara Williams, was one of the founding members: "She was the Mother of the Church," Graham said.

Graham is now a counselor at Avalon Center, a nonprofit organization that specializes in the prevention, education, shelter and support

services of domestic violence and sexual assault victims in Williamsburg.

She also is an ordained associate minister at The Historic First Baptist Church, one of the oldest Black churches in America, founded in 1776. This means that on a volunteer basis she writes sermons, preaches, assist the pastor with certain projects and teaches Sunday school.

She is a board member of Let Freedom Ring Foundation, an organization created to preserve the artifacts of the church. One big project was a freedom bell, which the church restored with the help of Colonial Williamsburg, an organization that aids in preservation, education and research in Williamsburg.

After they got the bell restored, President Barack Obama rang it when the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture officially opened in September of 2016. Graham said the church had a watch party of the event.

One of the poems in her book is centered around the freedom bell and why people rang it.

“Lots of people have come to ring the bell ... and they tell us ‘Hey, I’m ringing this for my grandma who never had a chance to vote’ ... or whatever they’re ringing it for,” she said.

In her spare time she likes to crochet, sew and craft, but through her church’s partnership with Colonial Williamsburg, Graham is getting to experience an architectural discovery that lies where the original foundation of the church first was.

The original brick and mortar building where it was located on Nassau Street was torn down and paved over and a community of original

church members' descendants, along with the help of Colonial Williamsburg, made efforts to get the land uncovered.

When that was done, the church's graveyard and remains were discovered in the ground and the descendants are leading the efforts to excavate and exhume the bodies of their ancestors and learn from what they find.

"I'm excited about who they find and how they're connected to people we know ... We have some generations at the church who have been with the church for a long time," she added about the church project.

Graham also has a parallel personal project which is that she traced her family history all the way back to the 1840s. "I think our history is important and it helps people to stay connected," she said about both projects.

Graham has written her first book, "Find Your Voice Find Your Healing," which contains poetry that she hopes people can relate to.

Her poetry was inspired by her roles as minister and counselor. Many of the poems address what people deal with in life, and the book has questions intended to help people think about topics that will help them heal.



Juanita Graham's book "Find Your Voice Find Your Healing" is available at Books and Crannies and Fayette Area Historical Initiative. Graham, a Martinsville native, is an associate minister at one of the oldest Black churches in America, and she is working to preserve its heritage. Juanita Graham is a Martinsville native who now lives in Williamsburg.

She doesn't have a particular style of poem that she writes; rather, God speaks through her while she writes, she said. Some of the poems rhyme and others are just how the words come to her mind.

The back of the book contains a notes section where readers can jot down anything they need to while reading Graham's poems.

One of her favorite poems in the book is called "Shots Ringing," and she said it is one poem that she hopes loses meaning or relevance, because that will mean that shootings have become less prevalent in our society.

Her book can be purchased at Books and Crannies, 50 E. Church St. and through Amazon and Barnes and Noble online. The book is also on display at the Fayette Area Historical Initiative, 211 Fayette St.