

Former Channel 8 reporter to discuss her new memoir

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For years Natasha Alford did not see herself within popular culture or the books she read.

The daughter of a Black father and Puerto Rican mother, Alford sometimes found herself immersed in yet straddling both cultures. There was much to both the joys of her life and the hand-in-hand challenges that did not seem represented elsewhere.



Alford

“No story or book talked about my American experience,” said Alford, a former WROC-TV (Channel 8) reporter. “No one knew what it was like to live at that intersection of identity.”

Alford now has corralled those experiences within a rich and educational memoir, “American Negra,” which is being noticed nationwide. The book, released this year, made Elle magazine’s list of the “Most Anticipated” non-fiction books for 2024 and Alford has been on a book tour that brings her to Rochester Sunday.

On Sunday, March 17, Alford will be in the community room at the Pittsford Barnes & Noble from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. discussing and signing the memoir.

“I can’t wait,” Alford said in a telephone interview about her local visit. “It’s going to be such a full circle.”

A personal story with history

Alford’s life in itself makes for a compelling memoir. A studious youth who mastered oratorical skills, then made her way to Harvard, she sometimes found herself on the periphery of her social circles when young.

Not everyone had the same goals, and even skin color — her light skin occasionally separated her — and hair could also be a dividing line.

Alford manages to write with both a warmth and occasional ache at these memories. But she also infuses her memoir with history, whether discussing Black hair, the past and present of Puerto Rico (“we’re not teaching people what our relationship is with the Commonwealth,” she said), or the path of Black students to Ivies like Harvard.

In lesser hands, these detours into history could be rocky bumps, threatening to derail the narrative. But Alford weaves the research in seamlessly, broadening the memoir well beyond herself while still illuminating her story that is the book’s core.

Asked why she chose to merge in history, some dating back centuries. Alford said. “I think it came natu-

rally, that is being a journalist and this journalism instinct where you want to know the why.

“I needed to understand these systemic factors that shaped my experience, policy factors that shaped my experience.”

From WROC to CNN

A Syracuse native, Alford found her first journalism job after college at WROC-TV in Rochester. It would not be her last.

In 2015 she joined “TheGrio,” then a fledgling website that focused on Black culture and news. The operation was then largely a start-up, but has since grown into an influential voice in media circles, one providing perspectives often not found elsewhere.

“I couldn’t have planned it better,” she said of landing at TheGrio. “That’s kind of how life works.”

There she now hosts a show “TheGrio Weekly,” that can be found digitally and on cable TV. She is also the media company’s vice-president of digital content and a senior correspondent.

As well, she is now pursuing a master’s degree in public policy at Princeton University, a goal that she describes as a “lifelong dream.”

Her work at TheGrio also provided a stepping stone to CNN, where she now appears as an analyst to discuss politics and policy.

“It was honestly just something that showed up at my doorstep,” Alford said. A fellow journalist mentioned her to a CNN producer, she joined one discussion panel, then continued to be invited back.

The memoir’s future

For Alford, the dream-come-true with her memoir would be to see it in schools, so children like her can see themselves and others can learn from the experiences.

Alford, who also has taught through the “Teach for America” program, said of both Puerto Rican and Black citizens, “We are intertwined in the foundations of American history.”

As some school districts shy from the uglier chapters of American history, Alford said she worries that teachers will find the need to “censor themselves.”

“I think people should embrace history,” Alford said. “They shouldn’t run from it.

“There is power in making peace with the past,” she said, a line that could well serve as the foundation of “American Negra.”

“We need narratives that help us to understand how to move beyond simple categories.” Alford said.