

A Conversation With The Great Actress: Keshia Knight Pulliam

Written by Kam Williams
Friday, 01 June 2012 14:21



Born in Newark, New Jersey on April 9, 1979, Keshia Knight Pulliam entered showbiz at an early age, making TV commercials as a toddler and already landing a recurring role on Sesame Street by the age of 3. But it was on [*The Cosby Show*](#) that she wormed herself into America's hearts as adorable Rudy Huxtable, the baby of the much-beloved television family.

In 1984, she earned an NAACP Image Award for her work on that celebrated series, and a couple of years after that she became **the youngest actress ever** to be nominated for an Emmy. When *Cosby's* 8-year run ended, Keshia turned her attention to academics and eventually attending prestigious Spelman College in Atlanta where she majored in Sociology (with a concentration in film) and graduated with honors 2001.

Soon after graduating, she returned to the limelight as a contestant on a couple of game shows, emerging victorious on celebrity versions of both *Fear Factor* and *The Weakest Link*. In an effort ostensibly-designed to shed her little girl image, Keshia next posed for a swimsuit/lingerie layout in *Black Men's Magazine* BI

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in 2005. Since then, she successfully made the transition back to acting, appearing in such movies as

The Gospel, Beauty Shop

and

Death Toll

, before returning to TV to join the cast of

House of Payne

. She won another NAACP Image Award for her performance on that Tyler Perry hit sitcom.

Here, she talks about co-starring as Candace, a college student-turned-prostitute, in

Perry's Madea Goes to Jail

, the #1 film at the box-office two weeks after its release.

[This interview was conducted in 2009]

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KAM WILLIAMS TALKS TO KESHIA KNIGHT PULLIAM:

KW: Thanks so much for the time, Keshia [Pulliam].

KKP: You're welcome.

KW: Are you in touch with anybody from *The Cosby Show*?

KKP: Yes, Phylicia Rashād actually came to the premiere of *Madea Goes to Jail* in New York, and Tempestt [Bledsoe] just sent me a text message a couple days ago congratulating me and letting me know I'd done a great job.

KW: What interested you in being a part of this movie?

KKP: I'd already worked with Tyler on *House of Payne*, so...

KW: [Cuts her off] That's right. Congratulations on your Image Award.

KKP: Thank you very much.

KW: You might not happen to know this, but I happen to be a voter with the Image Awards.

KKP: I did know that.

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KW: And you got my vote.

KKP: Thanks, I really appreciate that. I worked very hard on the show and on *Madea Goes to Jail*, so it's a pleasure and honor to still be recognized as an actress almost 30 years after I entered the business.

KW: Wait, you're not even 30 yet, are you?

KKP: I'll be 30 in about a month.



KW: Then how could you be recognized 30 years later, if you're not even 30?

KKP: I said almost 30 years later, and I've been in the business since I was 9 months-old.

KW: Oh really? I thought you got your start on *The Cosby Show*.

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KKP: No, before that, I had already done *Sesame Street*, a feature film, print ads and national TV commercials. So, I've been at this a long, long time.

KW: What commercials were you in?

KKP: It was such a long time ago. Let me think... Del Monte corn... There were so many... Sorry, I can't remember them all.

KW: So many child actors' lives end up such a mess. How did you avoid that?

KKP: Of course, you learn from the mistakes made by those who came before you, and even when I was on *Cosby*, I went to school and had lots of interaction with my peers. I think it's funny how society so often focuses on the negative stories when there are so many positive ones about child actors who have made that transition and continued to be successful. From the Ron Howards and the Drew Barrymores to the Jodie Fosters, there are so many who have made that transition and transcended the whole child actor thing. Still, the press prefers to harp on the tragic stories.

KW: You are originally from Newark. Do you remain in contact with any folks there?

KKP: Yes, I still have a whole lot of relatives who live up in the Newark, Irvington, South Orange area.

KW: "Realtor to the Stars" Jimmy Bayan question: Where in L.A. do you live?

KKP: I don't live in L.A. I actually live in Atlanta, Georgia. After I graduated from Spelman, I just stayed and never left. And I love it.

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KW: I forgot that Tyler Perry shoots his TV shows and his movies down there. Right?

KKP: He sure does. I've lucked out twice.

KW: How did you enjoy Spelman?

KKP: I loved it. I really enjoyed school, and I'm happy that I did decide to take that break away from the industry.

KW: Was it hard being such a big celebrity on campus?

KKP: No, it's a part of life. Everyone has their own different life experiences which make them who they are. No two people's life experiences are the same. And mine are just unique to me.

KW: Did you ever meet anyone in real life like your character, Candace, in *Madea Goes to Jail*, a college student who becomes a drug addict and a prostitute?

KKP: I think everyone has a family member who may have had a drug addiction problem. That's not foreign to anyone, no matter what your economic background, race or religion. I think it touches everybody's lives. No one's immune to it. But do I have a personal friend who shares the trajectory of Candace's whole personal story? No.

KW: I sort of cut you off earlier while you were answering my very first question: What interested you in *Madea Goes to Jail*?

KKP: I really fought for this role, because I wanted to do something that was very different and a challenge for me as an actress. That's what this role represented to me, and I'm very proud

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and excited about how it turned out. I think people will definitely leave the theaters seeing me for the actress that I am.

KW: Is it the reason why you did the layout in *Black Men's Magazine*, to try to break away from your cute kid image?

KKP: No, I think you're misunderstanding me. It's not about breaking away from an image. I think your body of work speaks for itself. It's your job as an actor to take on new challenges, and building upon that body of work. That's what defines who you are as an actor. For me, as an adult and as a female, I think that women are beautiful, and that there's nothing wrong with celebrating their femininity, their sensuality, their sexuality, as well as their intelligence. We're very well-rounded beings, and I represent all of that.

KW: How do you feel about being ranked #19 on VH1's list of 100 Greatest Child Stars and #11 on E! Television's 50 Cutest Child Stars, all grown up.

KKP: Of course, it's wonderful to still have people enjoy you and enjoy your work. So, I love that.



KW: I was very impressed that you not only went on but won on the celebrity version of a couple of game shows: *The Weakest Link* and *Fear Factor*.

KKP: Yes, those were a lot of fun to do. What I like is that they challenge you in different ways, one intellectually, one physically.

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KW: What did you do on *Fear Factor*?

KKP: I got run over by a Monster Truck, I had to swim with snakes, and I got dropped on a bungee cord out of a Plexiglas box over a canyon.

KW: Oh my God! Did you regret doing any of those stunts?

KKP: Not at all!

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

KKP: Umm... Nothing I can think of. People have it pretty covered. [Chuckles]

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

KKP: Working in this business, sometimes you get a nervous energy, but you have to sort of work through it. You can't really live in a spirit of fear. You just have to kind of go for it.

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

KKP: Oh, that's a good one. I actually am happy.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

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KKP: A positive thought book called “The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment” by Eckhart Tolle.

KW: The music maven Heather Covington question: What music are you listening to nowadays?

KKP: I listen to everything. Let me think... What has been my song recently? "Paper Planes" by M.I.A. is very catchy. I like that, but I listen to everything from rap to Lenny Kravitz to Coldplay, depending on my mood. And my favorite song of all time is Always and Forever by Heatwave.

KW: What was the biggest obstacle you’ve had to overcome in life?

KKP: Mastering being comfortable in my own skin.

KW: The Rudy Lewis question: Who’s at the top of your hero list?

KKP: My mom, Denise.

KW: Teri Emerson would like to know when was the last time you had a big belly laugh?

KKP: [Laughs] Okay, this is probably a really silly answer, but I was in the mall the other day, in the middle of the tie section of Macy’s with a friend when this guy came over and asked me my name. I said, “Keshia. How are you?” Then, the friend I was with said, “Oh, you just tell strangers your name,” even though he knew why the person had asked. [Laughs some more] I’m really silly and I just love to have fun. So, I then started joking and going, “No, my name is Harold” in a deep voice. It was the funniest thing ever, because we had our own private laugh, while this person looked at us like, “You’re both insane.”

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KW: The Laz Alonso question: How can your fans help you?

KKP: Just by enjoying my work and by giving positive feedback.

KW: How do you want to be remembered?

KKP: Wow! I would love to be remembered as a wonderfully-dynamic and multi-talented actress who left a legacy through her work, through her life of helping people and of being a positive force in the world. I'd also like to be remembered for doing my best at everything that I set my mind to do, while helping to inspire others along the way.

KW: Well, best of luck with Madea.

KKP: We've had a tremendous opening, and we're still #1 in the country. I hope that more people can still get out to see it and laugh and cry, because it's about all of us collectively, about overcoming situations, and everybody has situations.

KW: Thanks again for the interview, Keshia [Pulliam]. I really appreciate it.

KKP: Thank you very much.

Filmography

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Madea Goes to Jail (2009) – Candace "Candy" Washington

Cuttin' Da Mustard (2008) – Wendy

Death Toll (2008) – Mirie

The Gospel (2005) – Maya Walker

Beauty Shop (2005) – Darnelle

Motives (2004) – Letrice

The Little Match Girl (1987) – Molly

The Last Dragon (1985) – Sophie Green

Television

The Cosby Show (1984–1992)

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A Different World (1987–1988)

The Little Match Girl (1987)

Polly (1989)

A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court (1989)

Polly: Comin' Home (1991)

What About Your Friends: Weekend Getaway (2002)

The Mole (U.S., Season 4) (2004)

Christmas at Water's Edge (2004)

Tyler Perry's House of Payne (2007–present)

Harlem Heights (2009)

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Psych (2010)

Awards and nominations

NAACP Image Awards 2011: Best Supporting Actress in the Comedy Series (nominated) Tyler Perry's
House of Payne

NAACP Image Awards 2010: Best Supporting Actress in the Comedy Series (won) Tyler Perry's
House of Payne

NAACP Image Awards 2009: Best Supporting Actress in the Comedy Series (won) Tyler Perry's
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NAACP Image Awards 2008: Best supporting Actress in the Comedy Series (won) Tyler Perry's
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Emmy Awards 1984: Best Supporting Young Actress in the Comedy Series (nominated) *The Cosby Show*

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About the author of this interview: ■ **Kam Williams** is a syndicated film and book critic who writes for 100+ publications around the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa, Canada, and the Caribbean. He is a member of the *New York Film Critics* *Online*, the

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