

Lessons in Love

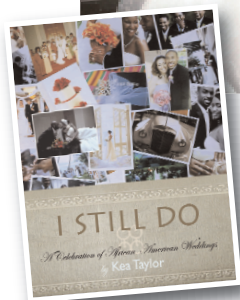
What Married Couples Can Teach Us

by arnesa a. howell

Despite what you've heard, yes, black marriage is alive. When Kea Taylor said her "I Do's" to husband, Rob, four years ago, she remembers being bombarded by others telling her how much work it would be. They were right, but they neglected to share how good marriage between a black man and black woman could be as well. She's experienced the transformative power of this love in her own life, witnessed it firsthand in the nuptials she's snapped as a professional wedding photographer and admired the captured moments as we all have of First Lady Michelle Obama and President Barack Obama. These are the inspirations behind Taylor's book, *I Still Do: A Celebration of African-American Weddings*.

"This book is for little brown girls everywhere who have never seen themselves in love," says Taylor, whose visual journey of black love spotlights more than 60 couples between the ages of 27 and 40. "There's a little girl inside of every woman who believes in love. I wanted to speak to that part of every woman."

The photo essays traipse across the world, from backyards to the Mediterranean. Alongside beautiful imagery, the book offers snapshots of black marriages and what makes them work through the words of the couples Taylor has photographed. Each chapter unfolds with an inspirational scripture and offers lessons in love. The overarching theme through



every story is defining your relationship on your own terms and not letting others define what is good for you—from relationship roles to communication needs. "It may not look like the Cosbys, but if it works for you, that's a successful relationship," she says.

Taylor admits each story touched her because she saw a part of herself in every woman. She, too, struggled with feelings of guilt for not being the domestic partner like her mother, cooking daily and doing laundry. And like another couple in her book, Taylor's husband was once incarcerated. But sometimes, love chooses you. "Never in a million years did I think I would marry someone who was incarcerated or had a child already," says the wife, step-mom and owner of Imagine Photography in Washington, D.C. "My husband has a tremendous heart and is a tremendous person and has many more qualities than other people I had previously dated."

These couples' stories are real, sometimes touching and always inspiring. They represent diverse experiences, from the blue-collar and professional newlyweds to those who lived together or practiced abstinence before marriage. Here, they offer their lessons in love:



◀ **LOVE LESSON 1** *Let go of the past.*
Shawnda grew up in a single-parent household and witnessed family members in unhappy marriages, while Antione's parents had six marriages between them. Neither expected to marry. However, Shawnda found her match in Antione, and she urges others not to miss out on their purpose by holding on to the past.

▼ **LOVE LESSON 2** *Relax the list.*

When Nkenge met her future husband, Robert, she admits he was a nice guy, but didn't fit her mold of an ideal husband. Formerly incarcerated, he'd served in the military and wasn't college educated. Her thoughts swayed when Robert volunteered his help, including after she had surgery. "I gave myself permission to explore him as a person, not as a list of things he could offer—degrees or job titles," Nkenge recalls.



▼ **LOVE LESSON 3** *Know yourself, faults and all.*

Married to Daryl, Janice realized the goal in marriage is to be fulfilled, not be the winner. By recognizing one's own failures, it's easier to forgive others for their shortcomings, she says.



▼ **LOVE LESSON 4** *Talk it out.*

When Jabari and Chanel experienced a communication breakdown in their marriage, they had to overcome the challenge together. Striving to be more expressive, Chanel tries to start the conversation with, "I'm in this forever, and if we're going to be together forever, I want us to at least be happy. We need to talk." ♥



PHOTO: Kea Taylor for Imagine Photography

Washington, D.C.-based Arnesa A. Howell is a frequent Heart & Soul contributor.