Before Scandals, Cosby's Wife Faulted Media Treatment of Blacks

From First Arts Page

dia's treatment of blacks.

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In her doctoral dissertation at the University of Massachusetts, in a book she later published, in a series of newspaper opinion articles and in a range of other activities that stretch back two decades, Mrs. Cosby has argued that the media, particularly television, has so distorted the image of African-Americans that it can taint the way young black people come to view themselves.

"I don't want others outside our community to define us, because they are doing a horrible job of it," Mrs. Cosby said in a 1994 interview. "And they are ly-

To some, Mrs. Cosby's ability to dismiss the accounts of more than two dozen women who have now publicly accused her husband of some form of sexual abuse, reads like denial, regardless of what the media may have bungled in the past. But Mrs. Cosby has characterized the allegations as a media feeding frenzy, and not unlike those she has seen before.

Jannette L. Dates, who with Mrs. Cosby wrote a 1992 newspaper op-ed article critical of the

Susan Beachy. Elisa Cho and Alain Delaquérière contributed research.

media, said Mrs. Cosby was "adamant and passionate" about trying to get network executives and others to be more responsible in their depictions of African-Americans.

"She wanted to shake things up," Ms. Dates said. "We were saying those images are demeaning caricatures. That's a thread that is still being woven today."

Her quest to create more positive images for blacks began decades ago and included efforts to convince her husband that Heathcliff Huxtable, the character who would evolve into America's Dad during eight seasons of "The Cosby Show," starting in 1984, should be a well-to-do doctor with a solid family, not a limousine driver, as Mr. Cosby had proposed.

In other settings, independent of her husband, Mrs. Cosby worked to preserve black history because she said it was being ignored. In 1995, she co-produced a play, "Having Our Say," about two pioneering centenarian sisters raised in the Jim Crow South who became successful after moving to New York. Nominated for three Tony Awards, it ran for almost nine months on Broad-

More recently, in 2001, she helped found an organization, the National Visionary Leadership Project, that videotapes inter-



Camille O. Cosby, who has called the accusations against her husband a media feeding frenzy.

views with accomplished African-Americans, Charles J. Hamilton Jr., a former board member, said Mrs. Cosby had been drawn to the project because "major institutions have relegated African-American history to the lower rung of the ladder.'

But Mrs. Cosby's concerns about the media run far deeper than simple neglect. Friends say she became particularly incensed by coverage of the murder of her son, Ennis, in 1997. He was shot to death on the side of a Los Angeles highway while changing a tire by a man who tried to rob him and later referred to him by a racial slur. On the same day as the shooting, a young woman, Autumn Jackson, claiming to be Mr. Cosby's daughter from an extramarital affair, demanded money from him to buy her silence. She was later convicted of trying to extort millions of dollars from Mr. Cosby.

Mr. Cosby ultimately admitted to an affair with Ms. Jackson's mother, Shawn Berkes, but he denied his paternity, and Mrs. Cosby became frustrated that the media focused so much of its coverage on her husband's infidelity, not, she believed, on finding her son's killer.

"All old personal negative issues between Bill and me were resolved years ago," Mrs. Cosby said in a statement she released in 1997. "We are a united couple. What occurred 23 years ago is not important to me except for the current issue of extortion. What is very important to me is the apprehension of the person or persons who killed our son. I appeal to all of you to help us find the murderer."

When The National Enquirer published an article saying the death had pushed her to the edge of a nervous breakdown and that she was sedated, the Cosbys threatened to sue. Mrs. Cosby

wrote an opinion article in USA Today with a headline that read "Don't Believe the Tabs."

The following year, when the shooter was convicted, Mrs. Cosby wrote another essay in USA Today suggesting that the murderer, an immigrant from Ukraine, was a racist who had killed her son because he had been taught to hate blacks by, among other things, the American media. In a 1998 letter to The New

York Times, she complained that the newspaper's account of the crime had depicted it as an attempted robbery and omitted a racial slur the killer had used, which minimized race as a motivation. (The letter was never published.) "I think the death of her son

hardened her," said Sylvia Faddis, a friend at the time. "And I think she became hard in the years she had to fight for the privacy of their lives. I think it is hard for her to trust anyone."

Mark Whitaker, an author who wrote a largely favorable biography of her husband last year, 'Cosby: His Life and Times," said Mrs. Cosby was hardly the first spouse to see protection of the family as the primary priority when confronted by a situation like this.

"You see this with political spouses," he said. "They come to see things as a battle and a siege and who is on our side and who is

An intensely private woman, Mrs. Cosby declined to be interviewed by Mr. Whitaker, and Mr. Cosby's publicist did not

make her available for this article. But she was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey in early 2000 and said she had known about her husband's affair with Ms. Berkes since the 1970s. Mrs. Cosby described a period in their marriage when they both had to learn to be unselfish and said she did not believe in "unconditional love" and wanted to be surrounded by "people with integrity."

Around that time, a young actress who had worked on "Cosby," the CBS show in which Mr. Cosby starred from 1996 to 2000, told New York City police officers that Mr. Cosby had attempted to force her hand down his sweatpants. But no charges were brought in that case, and Mr. Cosby, 77, who has denied all the allegations of sexual abuse, has never been criminally charged.

It is unclear when Mrs. Cosby learned of that actress's account or to what extent she understood Mr. Cosby's reputation as a womanizer during a period when he was a fixture at the Playboy Mansion and later when he often traveled alone on comedy tours.

Certainly Mrs. Cosby knew her husband had settled a 2005 civil suit filed in Philadelphia by a woman who said she had been drugged and sexually abused. The terms of the settlement were never disclosed, but the woman's lawyer said they had sworn statements from 13 other women who said they, too, had been molested in some way. More than a dozen other women have surfaced in the past few months with similar stories, a number that prompted several institutions that had been Mr. Cosby's longtime allies, including Spelman College, to drop their ties.

One friend, who asked not to be identified for fear of upsetting the Cosbys, said that beyond her love for her husband, Mrs. Cosby simply had not seen the evidence to suggest she should put any faith in the accounts of women she didn't know as relayed by media outlets she had long distrusted.

"She does not believe these women because they have no proof, only their stories," the friend said.

Mrs. Cosby's faith in her husband is not so different from that of the many ticket holders who still flock to Mr. Cosby's shows, give him standing ovations and say they are skeptical of accounts of abuse that took as much as 30 years to surface.

Such proof is also essential to Mrs. Cosby, who last year wrote an op-ed article in which she related the trusted advice that her father, a research chemist, had drummed into her.

"The evidence," she remembers him saying, "is the truth."

Time I Saw Paris," "If You Leave

Paris" and a swinging rendition

the famous Count Basie record-

Ms. Carroll, who is soon to cel-

ebrate her 90th birthday with un-

diminished vitality, has an essen-

But during "The Last Time I Saw

Paris," the harmonies briefly be-

came dissonant, and her musical

ment, inserted an ominous thren-

ody that seemed to acknowledge

Musicians with an unerring

taste in great songs, Ms. Carroll

set that maintained the same bal-

ance of light and shadow as Ber-

Dance." An instrumental version

of "Gee, Officer Krupke" carried

playfulness to the brink of com-

washed through a coupling of

David Raksin's "Laura" and his

Ms. Carroll brought her mis-

theme from "The Bad and the

chievous parlando vocal style,

and the Cy Coleman-Carolyn

descended from Mabel Mercer,

Leigh standard "You Fascinate

Me So," whose narrator admires

"the sweet geography descend-

Both vocally and in her semi-

ing from your eyebrow to your

classical arrangements of Ste-

to Cole Porter's "Looking at You"

edy. A lush film-noir mood

Beautiful."

toe."

gether."

lin's "Let's Face the Music and

and Mr. Leonhart performed a

partner, the great bassist Jay

Leonhart, bowing his instru-

the threat of jihadism.

tially sunny musical sensibility.

of "April in Paris" that echoed

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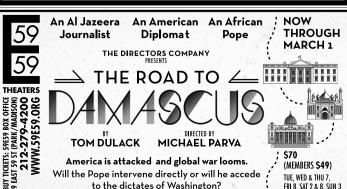
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