

# With a Nod to Cosby, The Black Family Channel Steps Up to the Plate

Now available in 30 million homes, the 24-hour digital cable network is dedicated to making a difference.

By Mary Ann Watson

**T**wenty years ago, American families of all races looked forward to watching *The Cosby Show* together each week. Much of its appeal, beside the laughs, was that it validated the belief in the American Dream. Claire and Cliff Huxtable, a lawyer and a doctor, were happily upper middle-class and they got there the old-fashioned way—hard work and higher education. Their five kids never heard the end of it and were never allowed to take the easy way out. That was the key to the comedy throughout the series' eight-year run.

Optimists believed the enormous success of the show would begin a new era in the history of black portrayals in popular entertainment. Super-optimists hoped the audience bonding with the

Huxtables would lead to improved race relations in the United States. But by the time *The Cosby Show* signed off in 1992, the splintering multi-channel marketplace and widening chasm between the rich and poor had altered the American social landscape.

Early in 21st century, *The Cosby Show* is regarded by many with nostalgia as a quaint example of “family friendly” prime-time entertainment as extinct as the dodo bird.

Dr. Cosby, though, has no intention of fading quietly into that pigeonhole of history. He's been on a controversial crusade since May 2004, when he was honored at a black-tie affair commemorating the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and he stunned the audience.

Cosby lambasted low-income black parents for not “holding up their end” in the implied deal of the civil rights movement. In return for the sacrifices made by early activists, the succeeding generations would take advantage of every hard-fought opportunity. “People marched and were hit in the head with rocks to get an education,” Cosby said. “And now we have these knuckleheads walking around. . . . I can’t even talk the way these people talk: ‘Why you ain’t?’ ‘Where you is?’ You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth!”

While some in the black community took umbrage at his harsh criticism, which they characterized as an attack, the consensus among African Americans was found in headlines such as “Cosby Speaks Painful Truth to Poor Blacks.” *Detroit Free Press* columnist Rochelle Riley explained that some might blame the federal government or even slavery for their plight: “But as much as I believe America has not healed itself or millions of its residents from that horror, the memory of the American holocaust does not ban parents from teaching their children to read. It does not make you act out raunchy violent rap lyrics. It does not make you take out an AK47 and shoot a 6-year-old.”

Robert Townsend understands the power of entertainment to either undermine or assist in good parenting. The filmmaker, actor, writer, TV producer, and stand-up comedian recalls his childhood in the 1960s: “My mother raised four kids on her own. My father wasn’t there. I watched The



**Robert Townsend**

*Andy Griffith Show* and Opie’s lessons were my lessons. I think he taught me well. He reinforced what mom was teaching me and what the church was teaching me.”

Townsend also remembers watching reruns of *Amos n’ Andy*, which provided fodder for his first big splash in show business in 1987-- *Hollywood Shuffle*, a satire about black actors forced into demeaning roles. Since then Townsend has enjoyed an exhilarating, multi-faceted career. Highlights include the inner-city fable *The Meteor Man*, which he wrote, directed and starred in with James Earl Jones, Bill Cosby, and Eddie Griffin. Another feature film, *The Five Heartbeats*, the story of a rhythm and blues male singing group, followed. Townsend’s television success—both in front of and behind the cameras—was also stellar. Awards

poured in for projects ranging from made-for-TV movies such as *Livin' for Love: The Natalie Cole Story* and *10,000 Black Men Named George*, a period piece for Showtime about the Pullman porter strike, starring Andre Braugher and Charles Dutton. His sitcom *The Parent 'Hood* was a success for the WB network.

Townsend's latest gig came as a surprise to Hollywood observers. In spring 2004, he signed on as President and CEO of Production for the Black Family Channel, which was being developed by the Major Broadcasting Cable network (MBC). MBC got its start in 1999 when Willie Gary, an attorney from a hardscrabble background who became a multi-millionaire by suing huge corporations for underdog clients, formed a partnership with baseball great Cecil Fielder, four-time heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield, and Marlon Jackson of the legendary Jackson 5. The network delivered gospel music and religious programming to an urban audience.

When Robert Townsend was brought on board, the corporate name was changed from MBC to the Black Family Channel. "I wasn't recruited for the job," he said. "I went after it." The timing was right for Townsend, a father of four kids aged 5 to 15, to make a commitment to be part of the solution. "This has been a dream of mine to do something like this. It's been in my head for like 8 years, maybe even longer. Now, it's coming together."

And it couldn't come at a more crucial time. BET (Black Entertainment Television) was once a beacon of black-owned, black-originated programming. But in 2000, Viacom purchased BET for an estimated three billion dollars.

As feared, not long after the sale, BET canceled most of its public affairs programming, including *BET Tonight with Ed Gordon*, *Lead Story* and *Teen Summit*. More music videos, vulgar and violent, took their place. Those who initially took pride in the network felt profound disappointment, even anger.

Now there is another choice in the marketplace-- BFC, the only minority-owned and operated 24-hour cable network. The mission of the Black Family Channel is to create a wholesome entertainment venue that can help viewers make thoughtful choices in life and reinforce good parenting and teaching. Citing the inspiration of Bill Cosby's career, candor, and philanthropy, Townsend began the task of building a slate of appealing programming imbued with a sense of responsibility. "We have an opportunity to show families what they don't normally see on cable or broadcast television; positive images, positive marketing, and positive people mirrored after them."

Eight new series debuted on Thanksgiving weekend 2004. Three are in the "BFC Kids TV" block on Saturday mornings. *The Thousand-Dollar Bee*, a game show that celebrates the mastery of spelling and grammar is pitched to fourth and fifth graders. Tragically often, minority youngsters who speak grammatically and strive for academic achievement are ridiculed by classmates for "acting white." A simple idea that might just plant seeds for changing attitudes.

*Gory Stories* is a mystery series for middle-schoolers that underscores the notion that it's always possible for the wayward to get back on the right track. *Lisa Knight & the Round Table* is a talk

show for young teenagers. “If some young kid is thinking about having sex and watches a *Round Table* discussion and hears ‘Watch yourself, don’t give in to peer pressure,’” says Townsend, “I’ve done my job.”

The other new offerings are: *Barbershop Critics*, in which aspiring comics review movies, music, and pop culture; *Black College Talent Hour*, a showcase for students and alumni from historically black colleges; *Souled Out*, a critical look at the music industry and the messages steeped in rap music videos; *Spoken*, a poetry-jam featuring the best of language artists; and *Speaker’s Box*, which gives viewers the chance to have their say on politics, entertainment, or whatever is on their minds. Securing the rights to classics such as the *Nat King Cole Show* and ambitious original dramas are also in the works to complement a programming schedule that delivers sports, news, family movies, and a daily worship service.

Cynics might be tempted to dismiss the Black Family Channel as a do-gooder network that’s just whistling in the cemetery in the hope of resurrecting old-fashioned values. Those with a wider view, though, will recognize the potential of BFC to reach large and diverse audiences. The conventional wisdom that white viewers won’t watch shows geared to black audiences is totally 20th century.

The disillusionment with the current state of television is cross-cultural and cross-racial. Smart, uplifting shows that parents and children can watch together—or that parents can allow children to watch on their own—are a scarce commodity. Although BFC’s primary goal now is to become a



*Souled Out*

beneficial presence in African-American households, Townsend acknowledges the network’s themes of betterment and empowerment are universal and that, perhaps, a name change might someday be considered. “Ultimately we want to be colorless. We want it to be the human channel—human emotions, comedy, drama. If you want something you can identify with, tune in.”

There’s a lot riding on the success of the Black Family Channel. Any effort that helps strengthen the social fabric of urban communities is in all our best interests. Earnest men who could have rested on their laurels and their checkbooks invested themselves in a project dear to their hearts and deep in their souls. Now it’s time for advertisers, cable systems, and satellite services to step up to the plate and make it work.

---

Mary Ann Watson is on the faculty of Eastern Michigan University’s program in Electronic Media and Film Studies. Much of her research and writing focuses on the connections between popular entertainment and race relations in the United States.