



Queen Latifah
shows us how
self-acceptance
and a commitment
to 'never giving up'
have brought her
both success and
lasting joy.

Happiness Reigns Supreme

by Gina Roberts-Grey illustrations by Steve Anderson

In 1992, Dana Owens—known to the world as Queen Latifah—had a top 10 single from her *Nature of a Sista* album and she'd won a part in acclaimed director Spike Lee's movie *Jungle Fever*. She was 22 and had been famous since releasing her debut album *All Hail the Queen* three years earlier. But as the lights of stardom shined on her professional life, a phone call cast unimaginable darkness on her personal life. "Before I could get the 'hello' out, [my friend] said, 'Your brother had an accident on his motorcycle.' My heart dropped. I couldn't think," Queen recalls in her book *Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman*.

She raced to the hospital where she met her mother. Together, the two women prayed that Queen's older brother, Lancelot "Winki" Jr., a 24-year-old police officer, would survive the crash.

But his injuries were too great. When the doctor came to the waiting room and told the family that Lancelot had died from his injuries, Queen says her "world evaporated." She and Winki had been extremely close, sharing what she calls "a spiritual connection." As the days passed and she tried to cope with her sorrow and shock, she was also left with the terrible knowledge that she had purchased the motorcycle that killed her brother. "I never imagined that bike, bought in love, would be the cause of Winki's death," Queen says in *Ladies First*.

"That was a really tough one," she says now, the heartbreak still palpable in her voice. "It rocked my life to the core."

Queen started smoking marijuana daily. She spent her days checking on her mother and shooting hoops at a park and spent her nights smoking and drinking until she passed out.

It was by reconnecting with her first love of music that Queen tapped into the inner strength she'd forgotten was there. Pouring herself into her lyrics, Queen wrote and recorded her album *Black Reign*, which includes the track "Winki's Theme," dedicated to her brother. "I had to free my soul by releasing the pain through my music," she explains in *Ladies First*.

Queen also paid tribute to her brother on the open road. Not long after his death, she was back on her own motorcycle, riding in honor of her late sibling. Winki was there, too. Queen had had the key to his bike dipped in gold, and she wore it on a chain around her neck for years.

"You can't stay in those blue or dark places forever." Queen speaks in her famously husky voice and chooses each word with care. "You have to find whatever inspiration works for you, but you can't let yourself stay down all the time. Whatever your inspiration, you have to look for a reason to fight the good fight each and every day," she says.



It's Queen's fighting spirit and unwillingness to compromise her principles that have helped her move beyond tough times to win acclaim and a slew of awards in music, film and more—and to find a lasting sense of peace and joy.

Finding Her Crown

The loss of her brother taught Queen she had strength that could vanquish terrible despair. But the foundation for her courage in facing adversity was built years before that tragedy.

As a young girl growing up in New Jersey, Queen's parents, high school teacher Rita and police officer Lancelot (Lance) Owens Sr., taught her to not worry about fitting in. "My mother wanted us to define ourselves, rather than allow others to pin a label on us," she says. Both parents focused on developing their children's self-esteem, telling Queen and Winkie they were capable of doing anything.

Like any kid, though, Queen had growing pains. Concerns about being taller than most girls (and some boys) and what she calls "big-boned" left Queen lacking in self-confidence as a teen. As a result, she says in her book *Put on Your Crown: Life-Changing Moments on the Path to Queendom*, she "experimented with stuff that could have taken me right down into the gutter if I'd continued with it."

"Around 18 or so, I was making bad choices based on not loving myself so I decided to make a decision to either love [myself] or hate [myself]. I knew I needed to make some changes," Queen says. "I literally looked in the mirror and

kind of had *that* talk with myself. The one no one wants to have, but just about everyone needs at one point or another.

"I decided I needed to love myself. But I also needed to truly believe that, own that, and make decisions based on that. I had to accept myself as I am."

That moment was a turning point for the entertainer.

While her high school peers, after graduation, were setting their sights on jobs or college, Queen had other plans. Releasing her debut album *All Hail the Queen* in 1989, she became a rap star at age 19, using her nickname "Latifah" (which means "delicate and kind"). By 21, Queen made her TV acting debut in the smash hit *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

In 1994, she would also win the Grammy for Best Rap Solo Performance for her song "U.N.I.T.Y." With its lyrics that bashed the male rap culture for its sexism, she established herself as a powerful voice for women, one that has only grown stronger with the years.

"I've lived a helluva life," she says, chuckling.

'Never Stop Fighting'

Queen was picked to star on the sitcom *Living Single* in 1993, and during its five-year run, producers told her and other female castmates to slim down. She thought the idea was "ridiculous."

"We were supposed to reflect women in the real world," says Queen of the show in *Put on Your Crown*. "So what sense would it make to viewers if we were all skinny?"

When she did opt to lose some weight in 2002—the year she was nominated for an Academy Award for her role in the movie *Chicago*—she did it for her own reasons. "I wanted to feel better and have more energy."

Queen feels passionately that women need to love themselves for who they are and not for a perfect Hollywood ideal—so strongly, in fact, that she wrote not one but two books advising women on how to do so.

To maintain both physical and emotional balance, Queen continues to rely on the same looking glass that helped her turn away from bad choices as a teen. "I constantly check in with myself and look in the mirror at who I am and how I want to manage my life.

"I'm authentic with myself. I don't lie to the person in the mirror because the more I feel and acknowledge and accept, the better," she says. That honesty leads to feeling better about myself—the good and the not so good. It's very peaceful and calming.

"If I'm not eating right, I check in with myself to rein it back in and get back on track," she continues. "If I break down

LEFT: TRACEY ULLMAN, QUEEN LATIFAH AND MORRIS CHESTNUT MUG FOR A GOOFY SELFIE WITH JAMES CORDEN (IN TIE) DURING *THE LATE LATE SHOW WITH JAMES CORDEN* THIS PAST DECEMBER.

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QUEEN WITH HER MOTHER, RITA OWENS.

Queen of Compassion

Queen Latifah has worked hard to achieve her success—and she works just as hard to foster happiness, health and prosperity in others.

Following her brother's 1992 death, Queen and her family created the Lancelot H. Owens Scholarship Foundation. It has supported numerous local charities and programs in and around her home town of Newark, New Jersey, giving educational and leadership opportunities to low-income youth with strong futures.

Along with providing emotional and physical support for her mother, Queen remains committed to helping others who face heart failure spot the symptoms and understand how to manage the disease. In 2015, Queen and her mother, Rita, filmed public service announcements that share their family's story and educate viewers about the symptoms and risks of heart failure. Taking her advocacy one step further, Queen became a spokesperson for the American Heart Association's Rise Above Heart Failure campaign in 2016.

Queen is also a longtime supporter of programs and nonprofits that benefit AIDS and cancer research and those that help the hungry, women and children. She's decorated a pair of Stuart Weitzman heels for an auction benefiting ovarian cancer awareness and research. She has also gifted all the proceeds of her rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner," sold on iTunes and other streaming services, to support U.S. military, veterans and their families.

Last year, Queen received the 2016 Princess Grace Foundation's Prince Rainier III award, which is given to a celebrity in the arts who is dedicated to giving back.





QUEEN LATIFAH, KEVIN HART, WILL SMITH, HALLE BERRY AND DWAYNE JOHNSON CELEBRATE A MOMENT DURING THE 2016 MTV MOVIE AWARDS IN BURBANK, CALIFORNIA.

Her Majesty, By the Numbers

In less than three decades, Queen Latifah has racked up the following career credits:

112 nominations for awards for singing/ rapping, acting or producing

70-plus acting credits

31 screen producing credits

29 awards won

7 albums released

3 books published
(Along with her two nonfiction books, Queen wrote a children's book, *Queen of the Scene*)

1 star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame

1 Emmy Award

1 Golden Globe

1 Oscar nomination

1 Grammy Award

1 clothing line (Queen Collection)

1 TV show she hosted (*The Queen Latifah Show*)

1 supermodel contract (with Cover Girl)

1 makeup line (Cover Girl Queen Collection)

and smoke, which is something that hooked me at a young age and [which] I've fought my whole life, I have to have a heart-to-heart with myself to gear up to go back into battle and fight that fight. No matter what the obstacle, I think it's important to never stop fighting. I won't give up."

Queen says she checks in with herself "emotionally, to make sure I feel strong on the inside, too. Because if I'm not at my strongest emotionally, things like unhealthy eating or smoking can creep back in. I'm no different than any woman today. When you wear a lot of hats and carry a lot around, you have to stop and check in on yourself."

Consistent introspection also promotes the gratitude Queen says is vital to her well-being. "Staying in a grateful place feeds my soul. I'm so thankful for my job and work that lets me not only survive but also provide for the people I hold so dear. I'm humbled by the gifts and opportunities I've been given. Reflecting on that fills me with such gratefulness. It lifts my spirits any time I think about it."

Queen of Hearts

In 2004, Queen's mother, Rita Owens, was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. The news sent waves of shock and fear through her daughter. "It was terrifying to hear that because all you can think is 'My mom's gonna die,'" Queen says.

Getting Rita on the right diet and medicine regimens calmed both mother and daughter. "It was empowering to be able to have these things to do," Queen shares. "You feel like you can take back some control."

Subsequent health issues and complications have led to Rita's requiring oxygen—and to Queen's donning of another hat.

"I'm a soldier for good health on a mission to help and save my mom," says Queen, who lives part-time in Rita's New Jersey home to share caregiving duties along with relatives and medical professionals.

"Anything you see [me do] on TV and movies doesn't exist without my mom. She's done so much for us, I want to do anything I can to make her happy.

"My mom's sense of humor and ability to always say something 'just right' can change my whole attitude," she says. "I'd say she's my happiness role model, but honestly, my whole family continues to shape my positive outlook and attitude.

"The love and support we have for one another is out of this world," says Queen, who doesn't restrict the definition of family to those who share her DNA. "My mom, cousins, best friends, and so on all rally around each other and pick each other up when it's needed."

Queen calls her group of close friends her "posse"—and most of them date back to her teen years.

"I'm fortunate to have people around who tell me the truth and celebrate a great job or smack my hand when I've done a bad one. That really helps keep me grounded," Queen says. "Having people you love and who love you, people you can share a mutual honesty with, is really something." Queen also credits her strong belief and faith in God with keeping her grounded and balanced.

In 2015, Queen and her mom filmed public service announcements that share their family's story and educate

viewers about the symptoms and risks of heart failure. That same year, Queen played the title role in, and was one of the executive producers for, the HBO movie *Bessie*, about the singer Bessie Smith, for which she won both an Emmy and a Screen Actor's Guild award. "[Bessie] was not afraid to be wrong or afraid to tell someone just like it is, and that's a gift," Queen told *The New York Times*.

She may as well have been talking about herself.

Queen's Regal Grace

Over the years, Queen Latifah has compiled an astonishing list of accomplishments (see *Her Majesty, By the Numbers* on page 48) and she shows no signs of stopping. This year she returns to TV as both actress and producer. Queen's latest leading role is as the owner of a beauty salon who becomes a surrogate mother to a group of young girls on a quest to find success on the new Lee Daniels series *Star* on Fox. She is producing a Travel Channel series, *The Best Place To Be*, where stars divulge their favorite places to eat, drink, shop and sightsee.

Anyone with a résumé like hers could easily develop a diva-sized attitude, but Queen never plays the snooty royal card. Indeed, her humility can be disarming.

"There's really no reason I should have done what I have," she says. "I'm an African-American girl from Newark who doesn't have the typical look for a lot of the things I've wanted to do.

"I have always been good at keeping it real with myself," she says. "I know I'm not always perfect at doing the right things. My life is a work in progress, and I'm not going to create a lie about who I am."

Long live the Queen. 



Queen feels passionately that women need to love themselves for who they are and not for a perfect Hollywood ideal—so strongly, in fact, that she wrote not one but two books advising women on how to do so.

QUEEN LATIFAH IN THE SPECIAL PREMIERE OF HER NEW SERIES *STAR* ON FOX.

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