

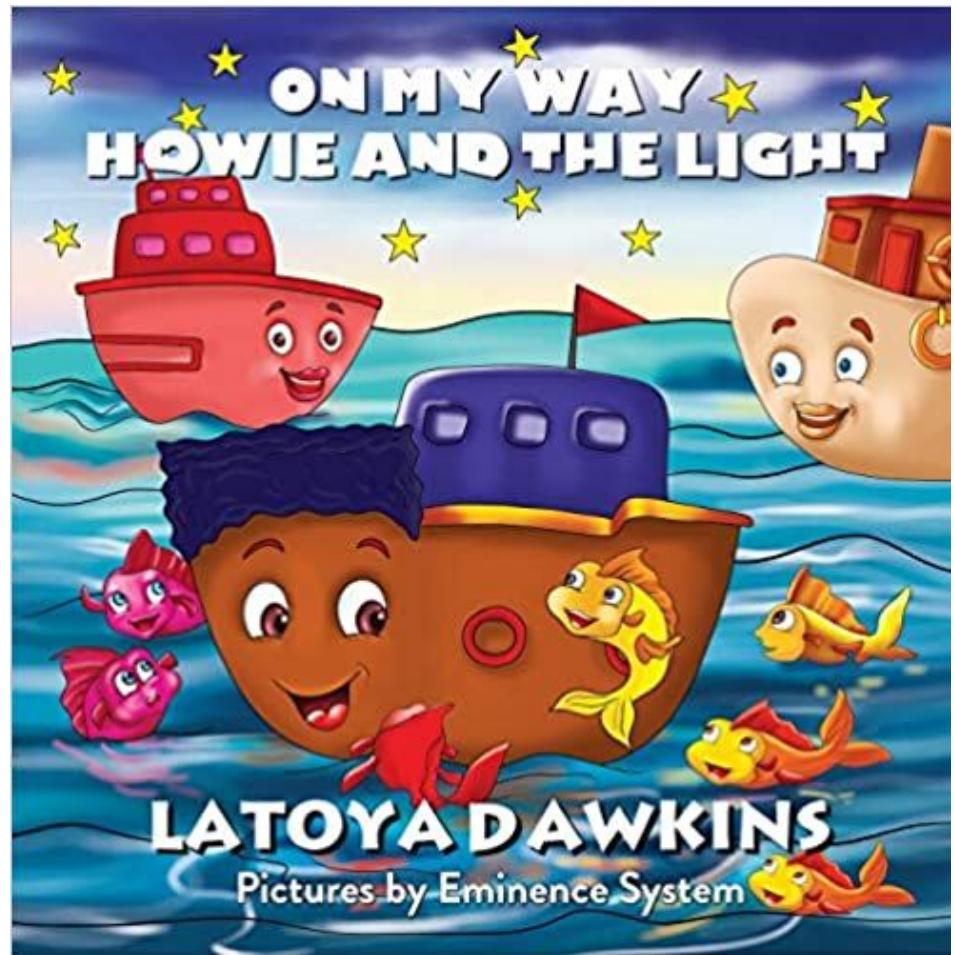
https://lancasteronline.com/features/author-latoya-dawkins-to-give-virtual-reading-to-students-at-king-elementary-her-alma-mater/article_965a5dce-8039-11eb-ae14-b3d6d01f7586.html

Author Latoya Dawkins to give virtual reading to students at King Elementary, her alma mater [Q&A]



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SUBMITTED

Latoya Dawkins' professional credentials are so numerous, they would be better suited for a scroll than a standard business card.

The Lancaster native grew up with a deep appreciation for literature, sinking her hooks into stories of characters like Celie from “The Color Purple” and the Logans of “Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.”

Jobs as a paralegal and legal assistant led her to work as a health-care attorney. Then, personal struggles led to a new passion; after she and her late husband navigated infertility, the couple created the Latoya and Joe Dawkins Miracle Child Foundation, also known as Our Miracle Child, which works to raise fertility awareness and secure grants for couples battling infertility without insurance or resources for treatment.

And even while pursuing all of that, Dawkins’ work led her back to literature. She released her first book, “On My Way: Howie and the Light,” on her late husband’s birthday, Jan. 7. The book follows a spirited boat’s journey from being lost on the high seas to finding his way back home.

“I knew I wanted to write for young boys and girls like me from underrepresented communities like the 7th ward of Lancaster that prepared me for this world that can be, frankly, harrowing,” Dawkins wrote in an email.

Dawkins’ Black identity is a driving force behind her characters.

“I want my characters to conjure up oral histories of remembering the world(s) we come from: the intentionality of a mother insistent that for every white doll I had a specially ordered Black doll, too; the first person my community knew to have a Black Cabbage Patch Doll; and the love stories of fathers like mine who gave up their dreams and made honest and hard labor their very existence and purpose for a better life for their families ‘up north,’ ” Dawkins says.

Dawkins will do a virtual reading of “On My Way: Howie and the Light” at her alma mater, King Elementary School, on Friday.

Below, Dawkins answered a few questions by email about her book and what it means to connect with students at a school she attended. Her responses have been edited for length and clarity.

What do you hope young readers take away from your book?

“That storms will come, but you are never alone. The light is always there. Just like Howie, my husband and I found our light in midst of storms because of upbringing, community, family, courage and perseverance in spite of fear and insecurities. We were taught to love

our skin, the skin we were in, and we did. We loved ourselves. Our Black selves. We never wanted to be “other.” We loved our southern roots and our humble beginnings because it influenced our strength and was our foundation. ... It is important to me that future generations of readers, scholars, and visionaries from communities like mine have support systems that they can trust and that are paying it forward for their success.

Releasing a book during a pandemic means that in-person talks are, by and large, out of the question. Why was it important to you to still find ways to connect with children directly through Zoom? How have those virtual reading experiences been?

I’m concerned about access to quality educational opportunities for my community in this pandemic. We all know that we have to do more to address and solve the inadequacies in access to quality health care, education, and employment opportunities, to name a few, in underrepresented communities like mine. Therefore, I am working on initiatives to raise awareness for communities like mine where there are children that need bridges and pipelines more than ever before.”

You’ll soon be reading “Howie and the Light” to King Elementary, your alma mater. Is there anything you wish you could tell the elementary school-aged version of Latoya?

“Buckle up. The characters change but the crux of the narrative is the same. My mother said to me every morning I headed for our door leaving out to go to school every morning, ‘Learn something.’” That was her challenge to me every day. And some 42 years later, I’m still learning something new every day. Just like Howie, the journey was lonely at times as one of the few kids with two parents in the home, only Black student to attend Bennington College Pre Law Program in 10th grade, Hugh O. Brian Leadership Seminar in 11th, U.C. Santa Barbara Science PreCollege Program in 11th grade. ... It was all training ground and preparation. Those boys and girls from my alma mater matter. They are brilliant and have a leg up because of any perceived tough spaces. It’s in the uncomfortable spaces that we develop and sharpen as iron. It’s the pain that informs our purpose and perspective. I’m extremely grateful for literature, which allowed me to express that pain and create purpose.”

What would it have meant to you as an elementary schooler to see a Black female author who attended the same school as you?

"It would have made a huge difference. I didn't really conceive the idea of being an author until my Penn State days. ... Had I known or been introduced to Black authors in real-time in my formative years, no less who attended the same elementary school as me, I would have a bridge between the academy and canon and my local Black community. Still, early mentors like Ms. Jean Frazier, Dr. Louis A. Butcher, Dr. (Clyde) Woods, (and) Cheryl Williams were all dedicated mentors and teachers to underrepresented students like me and made it part of their life's work to spark curiosity and intellectualism rooted in deep, powerful histories from Black folk like farmers, like my grandfather who faced ... racial inequalities and the politics of rural capitalization that are still prevalent today. Each of them, and many other influencers, like my muse Toni Morrison, who passed away on my birthday two years ago, masters of one-on-one, hands-on motivation of students of color, paved the way and left a blueprint."



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