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Snellville's Denene Millner penned books by Steve Harvey, NeNe Leakes

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By Chandra R. Thomas
For the AJC

Denene Millner was among millions of women worldwide parked in front of a television during the two, yes two, appearances Steve Harvey made on The Oprah Winfrey Show earlier this year.

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Kimberly Smith, AJC

Denene Millner, an accomplished author and seasoned journalist, penned Steve Harvey's book, which has sold more than 1.5 million copies and has been translated into 30 languages.

Most were tuning in to hear the Atlanta-based syndicated morning radio show host/comedian/actor's sage advice about how to snag — and most importantly keep — a man, as outlined in his New York Times best-seller "Act Like A Lady, Think Like A Man." But Millner, from the basement of her Snellville home, was more focused on the reigning queen of talk TV.

"I was screaming, 'Oprah has Post-It notes in my book; she's flipping through my words,'" Millner said, pumping her fist in the air. "It was like winning a Grammy for writing."

What Oprah fans didn't hear was that Millner, an accomplished author and seasoned journalist, actually penned Harvey's book, which has sold more than 1.5 million copies and has been translated into 30 languages. It's not quite a Pulitzer, but having Oprah feature on her show a book that you wrote is pretty darn close. Some would argue it's even better.

"It's made a lot of people rich, but not me," Millner said. "I was a writer for hire so I was paid up front, but writing that book has opened up so many doors for me. I am now a New York Times best-selling author."

Millner last year was charged with converting the in-your-face style relationship advice Harvey imparted in the "Strawberry Letters" segment of his show (which airs locally from 6-10 a.m. on Majic 107.5 FM) into poignant prose for the 15-chapter self-help book — in a month and a half. She was up for the challenge, having written more than a dozen titles, including "The Sistahs' Rules," an African-American answer to "The Rules"; "The Angry Black Woman's Guide to Life," a humor book; "Dreamgirls," the novelization of the Tony Award-winning Broadway play-turned film starring Beyonce; and "The Vow," which received a coveted starred review in Publishers Weekly.

"We would meet in his office or his house after his show went off the air every morning," Millner said of the daily tape-recorded pow wow sessions that usually included a diverse mix of women, including Harvey's friends and employees. "We'd talk about a different chapter topic every time. It was a tight schedule, but that's what I like, get in, get out and get my check!"

Although Harvey often left the clan doubled over in laughter, Millner said she was careful to ensure his treatise was as insightful and enlightening as it was entertaining.

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"I held back because he wanted the book to be more serious," Millner said. "Of course we left a lot of it in because his humor is so natural and acerbic; he's like your uncle at a party."

Harvey describes Millner as his "translator."

"The fact that Denene and I are both married allowed us to be able to talk about everything in a candid way," he said. "When you're being interrogated by one of the best, there's nothing you can hide. I think we both learned a lot and she learned some things about her husband, too!"

Millner is also the writer behind "Never Make the Same Mistake Twice," the memoir released last fall by NeNe Leakes, the outspoken breakout star of Bravo's salacious "The Real Housewives of Atlanta." This time her name was on the cover.

While she may not have the name recognition or celebrity status many of her famous clients tout, her assignments and reputation have opened up opportunities that one day just might lead to Winfrey's couch.

Millner's illustrious career began when, as a ninth-grader in Long Island, N.Y., she decided to become a journalist. After winning a full journalism scholarship to New York's Hofstra University, she landed an internship at The Associated Press that ultimately turned into a first job. Stints as an entertainment and political journalist for New York's The Daily News, senior editor at now-defunct Honey and articles editor at Parenting magazines followed. In between television appearances on "The Today Show," "CBS Early Show," CNN, MSNBC, VH1 and countless freelance magazine assignments, she wrote books, including six co-authored with journalist husband Nick Chiles, including the "What Brothers Think, What Sistahs Know" trilogy and three novels — "Love Don't Live Here Anymore," "In Love & War" and "A Love Story."

The couple met while covering, for competing newspapers, the New York mayoral campaign of Rudolph Giuliani and David Dinkins. By then Millner had developed quite the reputation as an African-American relationships expert. Their wedding was featured in The New York Times, People and Newsweek.

"I'm incredibly proud of her and I admire her talent and integrity," Chiles said from their shared home office. "She's compassionate and passionate about whatever she's writing about and that has benefited her in the long run."

Moving to Snellville in 2005 was an easy choice for the self-described "old school journalists" who, after years in New York, craved a slower pace that allowed them to better focus on daughters Mari, 10, and Lila, 7, and son, Mazi, 17. For years they'd visited Chiles' parents and sister who live nearby.

"The Southern hospitality is real here; it took a while to get used to people speaking to us just because," she said. "And that whole thing about someone bagging your groceries and putting them in the car was just weird at first. In New York we're thinking, 'what are you doing with my groceries?'"

Within a month of relocating, she landed a three-book teen novel deal; the first release was Atlanta-themed Hotlanta about privileged Buckhead twins. Between cover stories for Essence, including most recently features on Atlantans Harvey, Leakes and Juanita Bynum (the televangelist who nabbed national headlines after her minister husband allegedly beat her near an Atlanta hotel), Millner still juggles her duties as a columnist and blogger for Parenting and pet project MyBrownBaby.com, an African-American parenting blog. True to her craft, Millner dips out of this interview briefly to conduct a phone interview for Parenting.

"Black women are never included in the national parenting debate unless you're talking about pathology," Millner said. "I am raising my hand saying, 'we're here and, yes, we have kids, too.'"

"I love to write about our [African-American] community in a way that a lot of people don't get to see; the way we live, the way we love," she said. "It doesn't mean that I can't write about others, too. I can write about anybody. I don't write for black people, I write for people who want to get to know other human beings."

Denene Millner On:

NeNe Leakes

"New Yorkers are pretty immune to seeing celebrities on the street, but when I was with NeNe on the streets of New York everyone -- old white women, Spanish men who don't speak any English,

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black girls from the hood, teenage girls from Scarsdale -- everybody wanted to take a picture with her. She was the buzz of the streets."

On Juanita Bynum

"What really took me aback about this whole story was when I met her in New York she just fell to pieces. She was just standing there crying and it made me feel like something really happened to her. Having her hike up her pant leg and shirt and show me the bruises on her body and her crying like that, it felt to me like she was genuinely hurt by what she said happened."

On Steve Harvey

"He was funny as hell but was so dead-set on making [the book] serious. His humor is so natural and he's really real, he doesn't care about your feelings either!"

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