

SISTERS

sister

Giving it to ya straight, no chaser



THE LAST INTERVIEW WITH
KANYE'S MOM,
DR. DONDA WEST

JANUARY
2008



THE DREAM



YOUNG JEEZY

YOUNG
JEEZY

What's he trying
to prove?

KARRINE
STEFFANS

says Darius
is back and
they're married!

THE DREAM

R&B's hot
hitmaker on
being married
to Nivea and his
most painful loss

+

KEYSHIA COLE, LIL' WAYNE,
NELLY, TYLER PERRY
and more...

VIVICA!

How she secretly
makes millions in
the movie biz

s2smagazine.com

\$3.50US \$4.99CAN



0 71486 03473 5

A Final Conversation with *Dr. Donda West*

I almost never interviewed Dr. Donda West, the mother and manager of hip-hop superstar Kanye West.

Originally I'd requested to interview Kanye to discuss his nonprofit organization, the Kanye West Foundation.

During the peak of his campaign in support of his most recent album, *Graduation*, I was informed that Kanye would be unavailable for some time and that, if I were interested, Dr. West would be more than happy to speak with me.

After a little over a month of negotiating a firm interview date, Dr. West and I were scheduled to speak. This interview would eventually be marked as Dr. West's final interview; she died two days later, on the evening of November 10, 2007.

As this article goes to print, the cause of her death has not been determined, although there is heavy speculation that Dr. West died due to surgical complications. What remains certain is that Dr. West will forever be remembered as a shining example of the essence of motherhood.

A mother is one of the most profound sources of love, strength, support, wisdom and inspiration. Dr. West was not only an inspiration and guiding light to her son Kanye, she was also an inspiration to many within and beyond the hip-hop community.

Raised in Oklahoma City, Dr. West graduated from Virginia Union University in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in English. She earned her doctorate in English education from Auburn University in 1980. In 2004, at the request of her son, Dr. West left her position as chairwoman of Chicago State University's English department and went on to serve as chief executive of West Brands LLC, overseeing Kanye's numerous business ventures. What is

believed to have been her most rewarding position was her role as chairwoman of the Kanye West Foundation, a nonprofit organization focused on improving the state of education for America's youth. In May 2007, Dr. West co-authored the book *Raising Kanye: Life Lessons from the Mother of a Hip-Hop Superstar*.

Throughout our interview, Dr. West spoke candidly and at great length on her book, the struggles of motherhood, her proudest and most disappointing moments concerning Kanye, her own upbringing, Kanye's infamous public "outbursts," what she would have done differently as a mother, her views on the state of hip-hop and urban America, and so much more.

Sister 2 Sister is honored to present to you the final interview with Dr. West before her tragic death, where Dr. West sums up the legacy of her life and contribution in her own last words.

* * *

Souleo: What inspired you to write the book *Raising Kanye*?

Donda: Well, I really wanted to write this book to talk about how Kanye was raised and tell all the readers some things about him from a full context, 'cause sometimes in just a radio interview, short sound bite or even in the written press, you don't really get a good understanding of Kanye. Because there's not enough time or the media tells the story from its perspective, and I thought that writing a book would give me the opportunity to share things about Kanye and about how he is raised that the world may never know otherwise.

Souleo: How did Kanye feel about you writing a book where he's sort of the

main subject?

Donda: We have a very good relationship and he thought maybe there needed to be some acrimony for the book to be juicy enough to sell. He felt like maybe people won't want to buy it unless we have a big fight or big fallout or something. And that was his only concern, but other than that he was very supportive and encouraged me to write the book.

Souleo: You mentioned the issue of respect. A lot of the times when we speak to other generations before us, they mention a breakdown in the community and in young people's values. During the time that you raised Kanye and looking at modern times now, do you agree that there's sort of a breakdown in values among young people and in the community?

Donda: Well yeah, I do agree. From what I observed, there definitely seems to be a lack of respect on the part of some young people. And of course this certainly can't be applied to everybody, but you see a lack of respect going both ways. If you see a parent in the grocery store yelling at their kid or calling 'em names or dealing with the child in that manner, that's disrespectful, parent to child. And on the other hand, if you hear children calling their parents names or they're saying "I'm not gonna do it" or not obeying, that's disrespectful. So you have it going both ways. I'm of the mindset that you need respect on both parts. It's not *just* the child should respect the parent; the same is true vice versa because kids learn how to respect by seeing respect given!

Souleo: What are some of the modern challenges you see to raising a family that might be different—or similar—than when you were raising Kanye?

Donda: Well, I think that the distractions



are somewhat the same but just more of them. Kanye is in Generation X, so I wouldn't say it's like my generation or my parents' generation. We didn't have all of the distractions. Where you have so much television and the kinds of shows that are on television, you have the Internet, you have ways that kids can get on the Internet and be exposed to things that they *shouldn't* be exposed to as children, you have radio and how it appears to be more concerned about making the almighty dollar than putting out music that is mindful and thoughtful and would have people to think critically about things. So yeah, I think the distractions today are much greater than they used to be. I also think that you have more instances of children having children. It seems to be almost a *fad* now for young people themselves to be

some behavior down that was inappropriate and shutting him down as a creative being.

Souleo: A lot of mothers feel like their job is never complete, so looking back, are there any things that you wish you could have done differently or improved upon in some measure in his upbringing?

Donda: Well, I know I'm more evolved now than 20 years ago, 30 years ago when he was born. I feel that I myself am a better person and I know a lot more now than I did at the time, and that I'm more spiritually evolved. You're just a different person after you've been in the world 58 years than you are when you've been in the world 30 years! It's just the fact of the matter. So when I look back, I don't say "woulda," "shoulda," "could've" or "wish I had." But I do know that I believe that I would have stressed

tations: I felt that my job as a parent had to do with providing and making sure that there was adequate everything for Kanye. Kanye's job was to be a good student. It was to go to school. So that was a requirement as well, and the same was required of me in coming up. And I think just to speak to Kanye in very endearing terms; that was something that I experienced as a child and I brought that to my own parenting as well. So there were just a lot of ways that I did model the behavior of my own parents in raising Kanye.

Souleo: You're now his general manager as well and working with his foundation. I have to ask, because recently it has been in the news with Usher and his mother having a sort of fallout. So I have to ask, how is that dynamic of parent/child relationship when you are

// I felt that my job as a parent had to do with providing and making sure that there was adequate everything for Kanye. Kanye's job was to be a good student. //

pregnant. It's not uncommon for a young girl 14, 15, 16 years old to have a baby, and I just don't know that she's had enough time to mature herself to really have the kinds of parenting skills that are needed. Now that's not to say that it's impossible and that there are no teenagers who are doing a good job raising their kids. But by and large I think that having a baby is an adult activity. And drugs are another huge problem you have, and I think it's much more widespread now than ever. So when you look at all of the obstacles that there are in raising kids, you can see why it's really, really important to try and keep them on the straight and narrow but at the same time be flexible enough so that they could grow and be creative and come into their own.

Souleo: Personally, what did you find to be the greatest challenge as you were raising Kanye?

Donda: Well, I wanted to find ways to be a strict disciplinarian when necessary but also to raise Kanye in a way where he felt free to speak his mind and to question and to soar. So I had to find that balance between really shutting

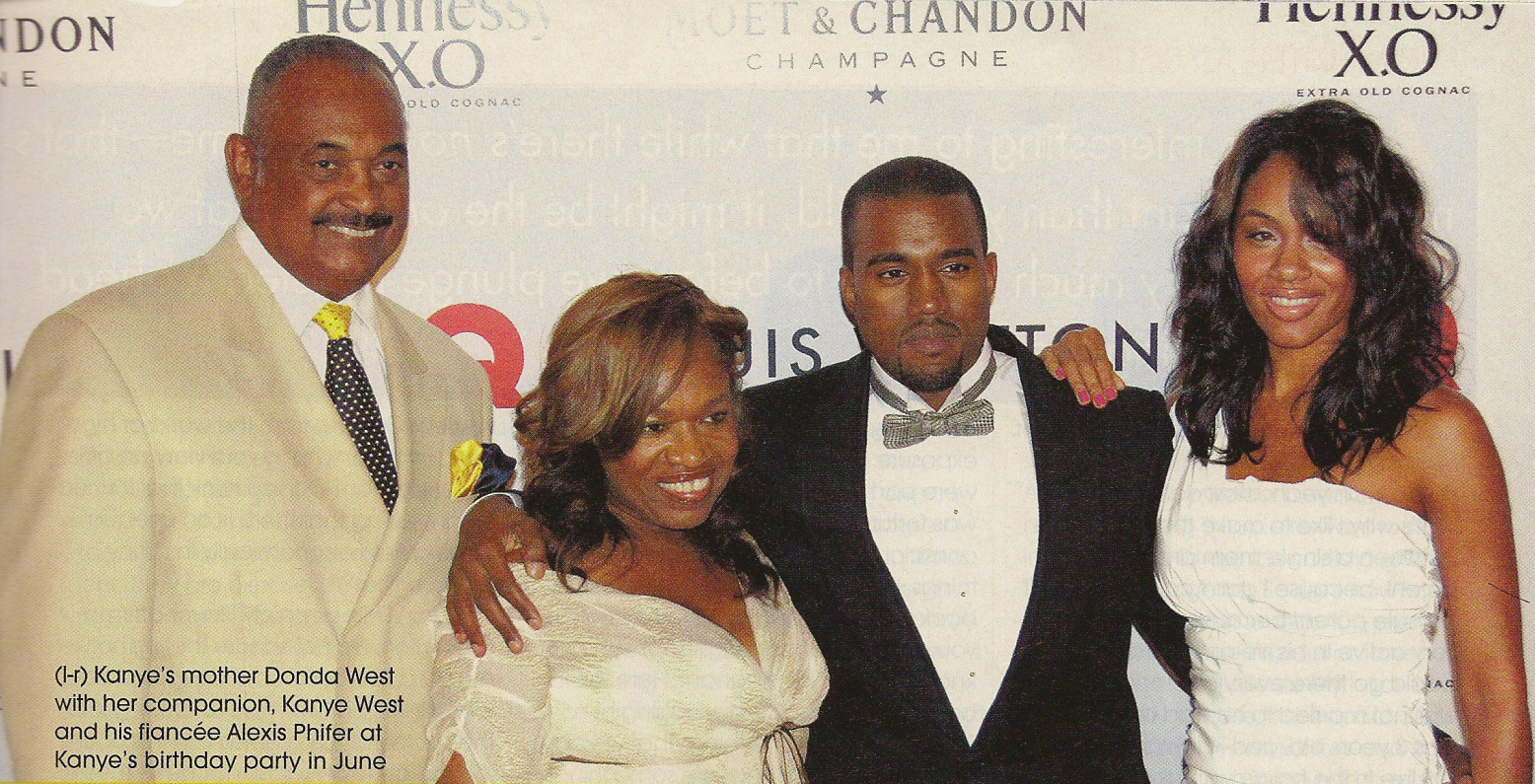
more, had I known too that although things are important—money is important; there's a lot that you can do for people with money—the most important things in life come from inside. And while I did stress that—I've always known that—I've really come to know that even more so in the past decade or so. I would just say that if I knew then what I know now, I would stress even more so how it's so important to focus on the inner even more so than the outer.

Souleo: What things from your own upbringing did you bring to the way that you raised Kanye?

Donda: One of the things would be the unconditional love. I always knew that I had the love and support of both my mother and father no matter what, so I definitely brought that. I also brought very high expectations. It was always expected that we not only do our best and be our best but be *the* best, and I think I brought that as well in my raising of Kanye. I think that has pros and cons actually, but I did bring that to the raising of Kanye as it was expected of me as I was growing up. I also brought—and I guess this would go under high expect-

involved in the business aspect? What were some of the challenges posed from that for you and Kanye?

Donda: Well, I think that there are realities to be looked at from both sides, from Kanye's point of view and from mine. And since I did, you know, at Kanye's request, retire from teaching and come on to work with him full time, I brought with me not only some skills that I could transfer from the world of education but also everything that is within me as his mom. So the first thing that I had to do is understand that I do work for and with him now. This is a *business*; you just don't bring all of the emotion, I think, that you may bring to a conversation just as mom. So that was one of the things, to think from the perspective of a business, not so much giving advice as somebody's mother. And that was a, you know, I don't wanna necessarily say a challenge but that was one of the things that I had to do. Maybe I was a little different from some of the other moms who have managed their children since very early. I think that was the case with Usher and his mom; I think that she was his manager from the time he was 12 or



(l-r) Kanye's mother Donda West with her companion, Kanye West and his fiancée Alexis Phifer at Kanye's birthday party in June

so. In that sense you are really still parenting while you're managing. But by the time I started working with Kanye in this capacity he was already a grown man, and I respected him and do respect him as a grown man. So for me the transition had to be made but it wasn't that difficult to make it.

Souleo: And what was your proudest moment in the raising of Kanye?

Donda: Well, I'm really proud of the fact that Kanye is someone who's very serious about giving back. Before he had made very much money at all, before *The College Dropout* dropped, he said to me, "Mom, when am I gonna give back?" I'm very proud of that because that's what we're here to do, to serve others and to be an instrument for change and growth, and not only to have the best life we can but to do what we can for others, be they relatives or friends or somebody that lives across the world that we don't even know. So I'm very proud of that.

I remember he accepted an award one time—it was an NAACP Image Award. I was listening to him make his speech—because I didn't go to that particular awards ceremony; I saw it on television. And I heard him say—he was accepting the award very graciously and he said, "I've made some mistakes and I've learned from them," and that was a very proud moment. And of course, I'm always proud when he does things like win Grammys and other

awards and puts out what I think is the #1 record in the world. Sure, I'm proud of those moments as well, so I have many, many proud moments. I think his accomplishments certainly make me feel very—*extremely* proud of him, but I'm also proud that he can recognize that he still has growing to do. He pretty much indicates that in some of the statements that he makes, so I'm proud of that as well.

Souleo: I think all parents have their moments when they're sort of disappointed in some of the choices or paths that their children may choose. What was probably your toughest pill to swallow about Kanye—disappointing moment?

Donda: Let me see, disappointing moment... You might stand to reason that I could really come up with something quickly because we know Kanye is famous for his so-called "outbursts," et cetera, et cetera, but that never disappoints me. So I'm trying to really think and be truthful about what I've been disappointed—I guess we'd maybe have to come up with another word. I can't really think of *any* time that I can think of right now that Kanye has disappointed me. There have been times when I would maybe choose a different course of action or different words or just a way to respond, but I cannot characterize that as a disappointing moment.

Souleo: I know that in the book there

were some things that I read he didn't want to get out. So how was negotiating that with the book?

Donda: There was nothing that I said in the book that Kanye didn't want in there. There were things that a long time ago he was a little bit hesitant about, like me not letting him ride the L train in Chicago. But he has since long passed not wanting that to be out. I think those are things he went through as an up-and-coming rapper, somebody who really wanted very much to break into the rap world. Looking back on it he understands why I was concerned. I say in the book the things I didn't allow him to do, and of course riding the L when he was very young was one of them. So at the time and very early on, no, he didn't like me to tell that story, but he didn't mind at all that I put it in the book because, in retrospect, he understands why I had the attitude that I did. He just wanted me to explain my reason for it. It wasn't me just being an overprotective mother; it was me understanding that, you know, things happen that you hear about and read about in the news all the time, and I certainly didn't want to put him in harm's way.

Souleo: I also want to ask you—I was reading that they said you were a single mother. At the same time—I think it was a *JET* article—I was reading that Kanye would spend summers with his father. So do you still consider yourself to have been a single mom though his father,

// It's so interesting to me that while there's *no* job—to me—that's more important than your child, it might be the *one* job that we don't give very much thought to before we plunge full steam ahead right into raising them. //

according to that statement, was part of his life?

Donda: Oh yeah, most definitely. See, that's why I like to make that distinction between a single mom and a single parent, because I don't consider myself a single *parent* because his dad was very active in his life and parenting. He would go there every summer. Yeah, I was not married to his dad after Kanye was 3 years old, and Kanye's dad did not live in the house with us after Kanye was 11 months old. *But* I always have been very proud of the way Kanye's dad lived up to his responsibilities as a father and as a Black man. I always am proud to tell how Kanye's dad never missed his child support payment—from the time Kanye was 5 or 6, that is, until after he went off to college. And not every woman can say that the father of their child *never* missed a child support payment. And it's not only about the child support. It's about being involved in his life—about Kanye going to spend summers with him—because to me it's very important that men be in the lives of children as they're being raised, and especially for boys it's particularly important. So yeah, I think the term "single mom" is appropriate because I was a mother who was single, but "single parent" is *not* appropriate because I was not the only one involved in the parenting of Kanye!

Souleo: Overall, what are you hoping that people get out of the book, whether they are parents or children, whatever?

Donda: Okay, well I think the book is one person's story of how one particular kid who happened to have gone on to reach his dreams was raised. And I hope that they will get from the book that it's very important to have a very broad approach to parenting and that it's important to look very consciously at issues that impact the lives of children. Issues like knowing who they are, self-

esteem, self-discipline, integrity, respect, exposure: All of those kinds of things were part of Kanye's upbringing and I was fortunate enough to give some conscious consideration to all of those things. I hope that people get from the book that parenting is not just something you do as an afterthought. "Oh, you know what? I got pregnant. Here this baby is so let me just start raising him." Sure, there are some things that we can do intuitively and there are some things that we don't give foresight or forethought to before we raise kids. But just like we would go to school to prepare ourselves to work in various fields and do our jobs in those ways, it's very important that we prepare ourselves to raise our children. And it's so interesting to me that while there's *no* job—to me—that's more important than your child, it might be the *one* job that we don't give very much thought to before we plunge full steam ahead right into raising them.

Souleo: One issue that the Kanye West Foundation, which you are chair of, addresses is the education crisis. You've had, I believe, 31 years experience in education. What do you see as the main causes of the high dropout rates that are currently affecting the nation?

Donda: I think one of the main causes is a curriculum that really doesn't address the full child. ... Most Black kids and all kids who go to school in this country have a very European-centered education and I think that's one of the problems. We need to give more than lip service to the phrase "multicultural." Another thing is parental involvement. If parents are involved—they're going to the school, they're concerned about their kid's education, not only that they're learning but what they're learning, and they have conversations with the principals and teachers and so forth and the kids see the active involvement of the parent—I think that this would help too, in reducing the dropout rate.

Souleo: Coming from the world of higher education, what is your view on affirmative action? Do you think that it's necessary, being that there is an unequal playing field economically in many communities?

Donda: While certainly I favor affirmative action, I'm not so sure that it's not mainly a Band-Aid on a deeper problem. I think that we have to really get to the source of the problems in this country and certainly racism is one of them. Affirmative action is a reaction to racism and I think a very necessary one. Some people would argue that it brings about what they're calling "reverse racism," which I think is ridiculous. But yeah, I think that the playing field is definitely unequal still, particularly when you look at some of the statistics. Who are the people filling the jail cells as opposed to the schoolrooms? It's really very apparent once you start looking into it. So yeah, the more things change the more they stay the same. That's a true adage in so many instances. And certainly I feel that there is much to be done to make the playing field equal. But at the same time there is still the truth that we must all be responsible and we can *never* use racism as a *reason* not to soar or not to move ahead. Even if it *is* a reason we can't use it as a reason because if so we are giving our power away and we're just saying, "Oh, if it hadn't been for that then I wouldn't have gotten this." No, we have to make a way anyway! So the fight has to be on both sides. We struggled through it and we persevered no matter what; no matter that there is still racism. And on the other side we must fight against that racism and we must continue to have things like affirmative action because we know, as you just said, the playing field is *not* equal.

Souleo: And the Kanye West Foundation is starting with the first initiative, the Loop Dreams project, which is trying to use hip-hop in a positive way to get kids

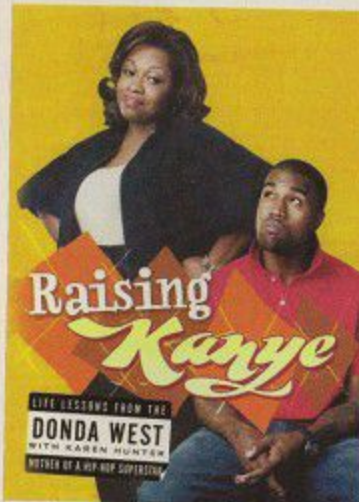
involved in their education and their dreams. What are your hopes for the Loop Dreams program?

Donda: The core of the program is learning to write raps and produce music. Stemming from that, we also have students exposed to various aspects of the entertainment industry—just not in front of or behind the mic but behind the scenes as well—so that they learn about other careers that are linked to music and the entertainment industry. Be that entertainment law or agency work—just a number of things they are exposed to. Even business management. They are exposed to all those kinds of careers. The program, quite simply put, is one where we have a music production teacher, academic support counselor, and they work together to teach the kids music, of course, but to also make sure that they keep their grades up. If they don't keep their grades up they aren't able to stay in the program. But they like the program so well that they make every effort to keep their grades up and we do provide support in the form of tutoring and intervention, whether that be going to talk to a teacher in a classroom or a parent at a student's house. We do all of that. The goal is, of course, to combat the severe dropout rate in the nation by really getting students involved in their education and compelling them to want to stay in school. Generally put, that's it. I could take up too much of your time going into that because that is my passion—this foundation and Loop Dreams and on a broader level kids becoming educated, not just staying in school but wanting to stay in school and learning something while they are there that will serve them well after they leave.

Souleo: And what is your point of view on the current debate on hip-hop's lyrics and images in the community?

Donda: I feel that there is the unfortunate situation in this world where there are some things that are supported that are not the most positive for young people. So it's interesting that if someone wants to come with a documentary that tells the truth about something—Black America, Asian America, Hispanics or any one of the ethnic groups—and we want to talk to people in a certain way and to tell the truth about history and to question the establishment as we raise

those questions, it seems that's not the kind of thing that's supported on radio or anyplace else. So to that extent we have an aspect of hip-hop that is supported much more than maybe another aspect of hip-hop. It used to be that those young people who really were serious and are serious about getting the message out—about speaking against some of the things that still happen in society—all of those rappers have to stay underground. They did stay underground; they weren't the ones who made a lot of money because that's not what was supported, in terms of endorsements or whatever else you wanna look at in terms of the economic aspect of it. So I think that there is something to be said for that debate that's going on now. And I also think that



there are those that would like to see—should I say “negative role models”? It's just, I haven't seen enough corporate support around the positive aspects of hip-hop, around telling the truth as we see it and supporting that. It seems to me that there may be those who want our young Black boys and girls to have negative influences and so that is what's supported. So I'm still looking at it, still debating it, still contributing in every way I can as I speak around this nation on that very topic. But I believe that hip-hop can be a positive force and is a positive force, but when it comes to those that can support it economically, we still have a ways to go there.

Souleo: And what are your hopes for the future of the Kanye West Foundation?

Donda: I hope that the foundation will be one of those entities that will have a very significant impact on curbing, if not eliminating, the dropout rate in schools around this country. I also hope that this foundation and Loop Dreams will eventually be a program in other countries, particularly South Africa and maybe some of the other countries in West Africa, whereby we can use music to motivate young people to want to stay in school and to use their artistic gifts in that particular genre. So right now we are a relatively new foundation and we have made a huge impact on a very small number of students. My hope is that we can increase that impact and that we'll make a very positive and significant impact on a large number of young people.

Souleo: And can we expect any other projects from you specifically—that you'll be working on besides the foundation or the business?

Donda: Well I am, right now, in the midst of planning a tour that I hope to go on in February and March—Black History Month and Women's History Month, respectively—where I will be speaking at various colleges and universities. Basically motivational speaking, but also to single parents, to those who are struggling to get their education but find it difficult to keep going and winning against all odds. So that's what I'm going to be doing coming up very soon: touring with the book and doing all I can to motivate our young people to continue in this struggle so that we all together can make a better world.

Souleo: Well thank you so much, Dr. West. It was an honor and a pleasure to speak with you today.

Donda: Thank you! It's been a pleasure and I'm honored to have had your call. ... And I hope we'll talk again sometime.

Souleo: Definitely. Have a great day.

Donda: Thank you so much. **B**

If you'd like to donate to the Kanye West Foundation, you can send your tax-deductible donation to:

Kanye West Foundation
8560 W. Sunset Blvd., Suite #210
West Hollywood, CA 90069