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## **Lyah Beth LeFlore blooms in 'Wildflowers' with her mother Shirley**

*By Kenya Vaughn Of the St. Louis American*

"I have known women...thieving women who will steal your money, your honey and unlaugh your funny..."

I heard legendary local poet Shirley Bradley LeFlore recite this line in her piece I Have Known Women at a St. Peter's AME Women's Day Celebration back in 2004. I remember thinkin', "I'm mean to 'unlaugh somebody's funny' ... that's cold-blooded."



It was one of those unforgettable moments of profound wordplay lines that stuck with me from then until now.

That same line kicked off the conversation with author Lyah Beth LeFlore and myself when we first met – in an interview about her novel *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life*.

"Isn't she deep?" LeFlore said about her mother with admiration.

The younger LeFlore was just stepping out on faith by herself as an author (she had co-written *Cosmopolitan Girls* a couple of years before) and talked about drawing inspiration from her mother's gift as a writer/performer as she embraced her new profession.

Two years and two best-selling books (one *Essence* and the other *New York Times*) later, the LeFlores have joined forces for *Wildflowers*.

The novel blends the mother's poetry with the daughter's fiction to tell the story of several generations of women in search of peace, redemption, meaning, happiness ... all of the things that women pray for as they go through the hiccups, road bumps and hurricanes that occur along her personalized journey.

"I was coming out of a divorce and came home for a while and the characters began to take shape back then," Lyah said. "But I felt like some soul was missing, and then it just hit me one day."

In her "aha" moment, she thought to use some of her mother's body of work to weave the stories of the women in her fiction to transition the story and illustrate the evolution of the characters. That work became the cornerstone and foundation for the novel.

"I came across a booklet of her poems that included *I've Known Women*," Lyah said. "I found it in some of my files and starting reading through. It was like, 'Wait a minute.' It started coming through."

Through this poem and others from Shirley's body of work (including an original piece she created for the book that aptly introduces the book and shares its title), LeFlore was able to add substance to the story of lead character Chloe Michaels along those of her mother, sisters, cousins, aunts, grandmother and the many women who have a special place in her life.

"The needle of my poetry threaded the novel, and I think it worked out quite well," Shirley said.

In *Wildflowers*, the main drama is in the relationship crisis that Chloe Michaels faces after a man steals her heart – and, subsequently, everything else – forcing her back home to St. Louis penniless and heartbroken.

An industry power player with a successful public relations firm that's in the middle of its first growth spurt, Michaels must humble herself as she works to rebuild a life when she decides to place matters of the heart above her instincts and savvy.

"How many women just want to be in love and act on emotion and end up in a situation," Lyah said. "I wanted to show that this doesn't just happen to the woman who doesn't have the greatest self esteem."

Lyah created her Chloe Michaels with self-esteem and then some – strength and pride to boot – but her attributes are further highlighted through her interactions with other female family members within the pages of *Wildflowers*, especially the character's mother Joy Ann.

"The work is purely a work of fiction," Lyah said. "But, like in the book, the female chromosome is dominant in my family. There is something powerful about having strong women."

At least five generations of women's lives are exposed through *Wildflowers*. And Lyah attempts to cover the vast range of emotions that come with womanhood – from struggle, heartache, despair, death, financial crisis to redemption, peace, salvation and ultimately victory.

There are more than a few points of emotional overload and a little too much attention to the superficial – including brand name dropping and especially the repeated references to skin tone, hair length and an insinuation of pride with respect to the family's ability to flirt with ethnic ambiguity.

"It's in so many of our families – we've been institutionalized to equate beauty to those things," LeFlore said in her own defense.

"There is a stigma with having long hair and looking a certain way. We must shape our minds different things that have been imbedded into our family and in our community and images see."

But most of all Lyah wants readers use her characters to illustrate the light at the end of the tunnel for whatever obstacles a woman might face.

"I want *Wildflowers* to give an overwhelming feeling of empowerment for women from all walks of life," Lyah said. "I want them to realize how precious they are."

Through *Wildflowers*, two generations of women – who happen to be mother and daughter– join forces to support and praise the female race. One has laid the foundation, but they carry the torch hand in hand to tell the story.

"I hope that I am living her dream by being an author, and I hope that this is the beginning of a long relationship of us working together," Lyah said.

"I have a lot of respect for all of my daughters," Shirley said. "But I know from experience that it's not the easiest task to be a writer – and she's serious about what she does."

*Wildflowers* will hit bookstores on Tuesday, September 8. As a part of the St. Louis Public Library's Authors at Your Library series Lyah Beth and Shirley Bradley LeFlore will discuss and read from *Wildflowers* on Thurs., Sept. 10 at 7 p.m. at the Schlafly Branch Library, 225 N. Euclid.