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SMC 'Jan Term' Speaker Series Award-winning journalist discusses race, gender and the changing world of news

By Lou Fancher



Geraldine Moriba Photo provided

Charging out of the swirl of another East Coast blizzard to headline a 2014 January Term Speaker Series event on Jan. 21, Emmy award-winning CNN producer Geraldine Moriba said change is a prerogative.

Sliding in with the "Metamorphosis" theme of the Moraga college's annual four-week jump-out-of-your-box academic term, the 47-year-old, barrier-bursting journalist and mother of two said she is "a mishmash" and delivered "a countdown" of 10 elements defining who she is today and the world in which she operates.

For the audience, mostly Saint Mary's students, Moriba might have been an unknown, unless they did advance homework. If they had, they would have read about her 11 "In America" documentaries, her 15-million-plus-views "In America" blog, her co-chairing the NBC News' Diversity Council, and her long string of awards, including five Emmy's. They may have even stumbled upon YouTube videos, in which she speaks passionately and articulately about gender, race, the news, careers, parenting and why she thinks women should "have it all."

Identity was the number 10 item Moriba tackled first, working through her countdown. Early in her career, she was asked by a colleague how often she thought of herself as African American. Her response was immediate, visceral: "All the time." Moriba could tell, the man - white, middle class, Jewish - was surprised. "He said he only thought of being white when there was a reason. To me, that's privilege," she told the approximately 45-member audience.

Moriba is a woman of color 24/7, but she also identifies as a descendant of Jamaican parents, married

to an African American man with Native American blood in his lineage, a cancer survivor, a self-described "nerd," a documentary filmmaker, a sponsor (not simply an advisory mentor, but someone who will make a call on someone's behalf, she said), and mother of Warner, 17, and 13-year-old Nia.

"Can women have it all?" she asked. "Why not? Quite frankly, it's the only way I know how to live. My mom worked, it never occurred to me that I wouldn't."

Moriba's ninth item, "Things I tell my kids every day," shot down any impression she is an impossible dreamer. She tells her son a host of wise words whose "back story" reveals sinister, sad secrets about life as a person of color in America. Have money and a metro card; avoid walking alone; carry my business card; charge your phone, walk away from inappropriate things or people; know what to say when cops stop you, are her daily, parting words. The "when" - not "if" - in her list's final item is a heart stopper. "Do you know about stop and frisk?" she asks. "Blacks and Latinos make up 88 percent of the stops." Her daughter's list is no less eerie. In addition to warnings similar to those her son hears, are: keep keys in hand, walk in the street where you can be seen, change route often, be loud and assertive when confronted. Race, more than any other factor, shapes how she thinks as a mother, Moriba said.

Eight students in a tiny, just-formed women's studies course Moriba joined during her senior year in college should have renamed the program "White Women's Studies," she said. There was no mention of African Americans, Latinos, female civil rights leaders of color or most of non-white history. Skipping number seven without explanation, Moriba described the aftermath of a six-month maternity leave. "I came back to work and everything was different. I wasn't getting those (breaking) stories, I wasn't on the crash team," she said. "I did resent being taken off the path I was on and thought I had earned."

The newsroom has changed since Moriba became "an accidental journalist" 23 years ago. Raised in Canada, originally aiming for a career as a foreign diplomat, her faxed protest statement, opposing a museum exhibit she believed was racially ignorant, landed her a job with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. She discovered her inborn assertiveness, inquisitiveness and a certain fearlessness were attributes suited to the newsroom. Today, with the newsroom's global reach, tight budgets, increased technological demands, lack of privacy and reduced regard for being objective and balanced (inclusive of both sides of an issue), she said ethical lines are blurred. The battle - to get your story selected, to be a woman whose voice is heard - remains fierce.

During a career devoted largely to telling the stories of the underserved, Moriba selected break-the-mold leadership by women, especially women of color, and zero tolerance for social-media-transmitted hate as her final caveats.

Her advice for enabling change and continued metamorphosis? Pursue your curiosities.

Final Lecture in the 'Jan Term' Speaker Series Jan. 30

Robert Hass is a world-renowned poet, environmental activist, educator, alumnus of Saint Mary's and former U.S. poet laureate. Hass will speak on concepts of metamorphosis in nature, society, and art at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 30 as part of the "Jan Term" Speaker Series at the Saint Mary's College Soda Center. On the subject of his talk, entitled "Thinking about Ovid in the 21st Century: Metamorphosis, Myth, and the Carbon Cycle," Hass writes "Nature is about change; both literature and science try to understand it, so it is interesting to hold up Ovid's magical stories of mythic transformation to modern literature, the development of ecology, and 21st-century imperatives. We can't speak about community anymore, nor community service, without talking about all of life."

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