



The Parkers' writing team, from left: Stacey Evans Morgan, Stacey McClain-Fields, Sarah Fitzgerald, Gary Goodrich, Michelle Listenbee Brown, Andrea Wiley, Bill Boulware, Dornita R. LeCount and Sara Finney-Johnson.

I LOVE THIS JOB!

SITCOM WRITERS

African-Americans watch more television than any other group. Yet according to a recent report by the Writer's Guild of America, West (WGA), of the 1,334 writing jobs at CBS, NBC, ABC, UPN, Fox and WB during the 2001 prime-time season, only 83 went to African-Americans. Dismal numbers, but sisters are making strides. Seven African-American women are on *The Parkers'* writing team.

Sara Finney-Johnson, cocreator and executive producer of *The Parkers* and an avid proponent of leveling Hollywood's playing field, began as a writer's assistant for veteran producer Norman Lear. She and former partner Vida Spears wrote an episode of *Married... With Children*, wrote for *The Parent 'Hood*, and wrote and produced *Family Matters* before UPN picked up their idea for *Moesha* and *The Parkers*. Now Finney-Johnson is employing perhaps more African-American women than any other TV executive. Her advice: "Be prepared. If you say you're a writer, then write. You never know when an opportunity will come

SO YOU WANT TO WRITE FOR TV?

Weekly salaries range from \$2,568 to \$3,278 for staff writers, \$4,581 to \$6,112 for story editors and above, and \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 a season for executive producers—plus negotiated perks. Here are eight moves to make to get into the mix:

- **Write a spec script.** A spec is a sample script for a current TV show. It's like a résumé. A good spec gets you noticed by agents who may want to sign you on.
- **Take classes.** Major universities offer extension courses in TV writing. Writers Boot Camp (writersbootcamp.com) offers a six-week course on the basics of writing a spec script.
- **Land an internship.** The Writer's Guild of America, West ([323] 782-4638) offers a training program that helps aspiring writers to work on TV shows.
- **Get an agent.** An agent finds employment for you and charges 10 percent of your negotiated salary. For a list of agents nationwide visit wga.org.
- **Get read.** Ask a fellow writer or someone in the business to read and critique your work. But not before you've proofread and corrected all typos.
- **Partner up.** Two heads can be better than one. If you're the jokes person and your friend is great at telling stories, consider becoming a writing team.
- **Network.** If folks know your work, they'll hire you. Meet other writers, producers and actors through classes and industry workshops, and get a mentor.
- **Ask for help.** Friends with agents may be willing to introduce you to theirs or inform you about training programs and scriptwriting courses. —S.A.M.

knocking. You also have to have faith and believe it's going to happen."

ESSENCE talked to the sisters on *The Parkers'* writing team about their start: **Andrea Wiley, coexecutive producer:** "I parlayed a career as an electrical engineer into a successful writing career by stepping out on faith. After transferring to Los Angeles with my company, I took writing courses at UCLA and penned a spec script that grabbed the attention of Norman Lear. Then I secured an agent and landed jobs on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *The Jamie Foxx Show* and *Malcolm & Eddie*."

Stacey Evans Morgan, coproducer: "My path to TV included publishing a poetry book, working as an assistant on *Living Single* and participating in the Warner Brothers comedy-writer's training program. I also served as a producer for special projects at BET, wrote an adaptation of a romance novel for TV and wrote an episode of *The Jamie Foxx Show*."

Michelle Listenbee Brown, coproducer: "I always envisioned a career in film but that changed when I assisted Ralph Farquhar, executive producer of *Moesha*. My script impressed him and he hired me for *The Parkers*."

Sarah Fitzgerald, executive story editor: "With a communications degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara, I wrote short stories and a spec script and was a production assistant before joining *The Parkers* as a WGA trainee."

Dornita R. LeCount, executive story editor: "I met Sara Finney-Johnson and Vida Spears while working in the Warner Brother's PA [production assistant] Program. When they moved on to the pilot of *Moesha*, I got a job as a production assistant and eventually worked my way up to executive assistant before joining *The Parkers* as a WGA trainee."

Stacey McClain-Fields, staff writer: "After moving from Chicago, I did stand-up for ten years, which led to scriptwriting and a meeting with Sara Finney-Johnson. I was also a writer's assistant on sitcoms, wrote stage plays and penned the Arabesque film *Hidden Blessings*." —SHERRI A. MCGEE □