

Woman spans cultures

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By Kathy Spencer-Mention

When the phone rings at Bernell King's apartment, a pleasant yet determined voice comes on the line.

"Hello, this is Bernell. I can't take your call right now. Please leave a message after the beep."

Then, before the anticipated tone, the soft voice provides the unexpected, repeating the greeting in Japanese.

And yes, it happens: A phrase that frequently follows the discovery that King speaks Japanese pollutes the mind: "A black woman who speaks Japanese? Wow!"

"For me, it's encouraging," King said recently, seated on the floor in her home, surrounded by Japanese souvenirs. "And I feel that it's encouraging to others to see that you can pursue whatever it is that your heart desires ... not be limited by what society thinks or what we're used to seeing or what's outside the norm."

At age 25, King has come a long way from her high school days. As a junior at J.L. Mann High School, she nearly passed up an opportunity to take a Japanese language class.

"My English teacher was an American and was fluent in Japanese. She wanted to offer it as a language, and the school approved it. And I had one teacher who encouraged me to take it, Issie Wright."

"I only needed one class to graduate my senior year," King recalled. "All I needed was English. I only wanted to make my A in English and get out of there."

But there was one obstacle: Wright, who taught keyboarding, wouldn't let up. "One day she looked at me sternly and said, 'Bernell, take the class!' She just really got fed up with me and my apathy. So I said OK."

King aced the class. And after high school, she headed to Clemson University, where she earned a degree in international trade and Japanese. When she arrived at Clemson, Japanese wasn't an approved major.

"I was the first person to graduate with that degree. It was God-ordained," she said with a smile. "My last semester, Japanese was approved as an official major."

"It's always fascinated me — the Japanese culture," King said. "Even the kanji — how they derived the kanji based on the meaning of the different strokes." Those pictograms are among three character sets used in Japanese writing. "It amazes me."

During her senior year in college, her fascination with the language and culture fueled a desire to study abroad. She applied for a scholarship to cover the three months in Japan. "The tuition alone was \$11,000," King said. "I knew I was not going to be able to go unless it was by the grace of God that I got that scholarship."

The scholarship was open to only one student nationwide. She applied for the funds in the spring of 1998 and left for Japan, scholarship in hand, in the fall of the following year.

It was her second plane trip, 13 hours; her first was a one-hour jaunt to New Jersey. She made the trip "with an open mind and an open heart to maximize the experience," a teary-eyed King said.

With a host family who spoke little English, she quickly honed her own foreign-language skills.

"I noticed improvements the second day I was there." Only her host father knew a few basic English words and phrases, she recalled.

"It was their first time receiving an American into their home, so it was new to all of us," King said, "and they embraced me as their own."

"I think that it was an enjoyable experience for my host family. It really broke some barriers and gave some understanding to them about Americans and African-Americans, and about our culture."

In 2002, her host sister and father paid her a visit in the States; it was their first trip to America.

King said her foreign experience helped broaden her horizons, too.

"It has become such a part of me. It's all I talk about. I'm constantly talking about Japan, Japanese food and Japanese culture. I love it."

The experience has changed her daughter tremendously, said Bernell's mother, Ruby King.

When she and others visit her daughter at home, Mrs. King said, "She makes us take our shoes off."

"Sometimes she calls me to come over, and I say, 'Well, I don't feel like taking my shoes off today, so I won't go.'"

And the woman who as a child hated eating fish now enjoys raw fish, Mrs. King said.

Today, Bernell King teaches English to Japanese businessmen and other business professionals at the Language House and Academy of English in Greenville. She also is a volunteer instructor at her church, Water of Life Christian Church, where she teaches a personal finance class.

And she spends much of her time sharing her second language and culture with students in Greenville.

In 2002, she started Visions International, a business designed to help people discover and develop a clear vision for their life.

After college, she said, "I found myself at a point where I asked, 'Why am I here? I can speak Japanese, I can do all these things. God, what did you call me to do? What is my purpose?'"

"I sought to have a career, something fulfilling, something that I enjoyed, something that I loved doing, not just something that would bring me a lot of money. I just set it to prayer, and the Lord gave me the vision for my business," King said.

She now uses what she learned through her own personal journey of discovery to help others struggling with similar questions.

She conducts workshops, coaches one-on-one and writes quarterly newsletters designed to help on that end.

It's all about vision, she said.

"You have to be a visionary in this day and age. The visionary sees the unseen and then makes the unseen seen. That is what we do. As a personal coach, I seek to help people personally and also with their career choice."