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THE WEEK OF AUGUST 18 - 25, 2016

# Gilda Rogers

## Changing What Needs To Be Changed

GILDA ROGERS sees many roles for herself: artist, journalist, playwright and author, educator and entrepreneur. But there is one role, one hat she wears, that the work she has done in all her efforts leads her to – that of activist.

"I think all artists are activists," said Rogers, a Red Bank resident. "Because," she said, "we use our work to speak to specific issues that we may feel needs to change."

But then again, "Maybe we're all just frustrated activists. I don't know. Maybe we all have that gene."

Whether it's genetics, our desire to create, or simply a need to change what needs changing, Rogers has been active on a number of fronts for a number of years.

Most recently she and a handful of dedicated historic preservationists have been working on saving the T. Thomas Fortune House in Red Bank. Located on Red Bank's West Side, the former home of a late 19th and early 20th century African-American journalist, newspaper publisher, author and early civil rights activist is listed on both the state and national Registers of Historic Places. The building had deteriorated to the point of becoming a public hazard and despite preservationists' efforts, seemed destined for demolition.

But with the efforts of real estate developer Roger Mumford, who credits the work of his new-found friend Rogers and others on the preservation committee, the historic Fortune House will be restored and donated to serve as a cultural center. Mumford will develop the remainder of the site for

an apartment complex.

The life of Timothy Thomas Fortune and his local home has resonance for Rogers. When she worked as managing editor for City News, a Newark newspaper serving an African-American audience, Rogers received the 2000 Fortune Award from the Garden State Association of Black Journalists. (Rogers, incidentally, started her journalism career as a sports reporter for the Asbury Park Press and believes, "Once a journalist always a journalist.")

That, along with her studies for a master's degree in history from Monmouth University, West Long Branch, as well as a trip to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in New York City, opened her eyes to the importance of Fortune's work and life; and for the house's significance for the community. "What a goldmine for the community," to have this historical resource right here, which will eventually be accessible to the public, especially children, she said.

"I always had a love of history," she acknowledged, leading her to earn the graduate degree. It has also led her to teach a course in black history at Brookdale Community College, Lincroft, where she also teaches writing and a summer GED (General Education Development) course for students seeking a high school diploma outside of high school. When she was a student and took the African-American history course, "I walked away a changed person," gaining a perspective that was lacking in education growing up, she explained.

In the past, Rogers has worked as director for the

School Based Youth Services Program, commonly called the Source, at Red Bank Regional High School, offering students and their families access to needed social service programs and counseling.

Currently she's working for the Two River Theater, an Equity theatrical venue and educational facility in Red Bank, serving as the venue's community affairs coordinator as the theater looks to embrace the community's diversity through productions and programs.

Rogers has written "Supernatural: The Play," with co-playwrights Audrey Kelley and Candace O. Kelley, a play, professionally produced around the country, detailing the pressures African-American women face to bend their hairstyles and appearances to meet conventional beauty standards.

"Fearless: A Bold Approach to Reinventing Your Life," self-published by Rogers, Candace O. Kelley and Caryl Lucas, is part self-help tome and narrative about women of color taking control of their circumstances.

"That's a spinoff out of what I do with Frank Talk Multi-Media," she said of the book and of her multimedia production company that produces among other things her cable TV public access discussion show "Frank Talk."

Also on the activist front, Rogers has been coordinating a regular community discussion group called "Let's Talk About Race," which, as the name implies, encourages conversation on the issue, especially timely given events that seem to occur weekly across the country.

"We should use all of our talents and ability to make the world a better place," she offered about her activities.

She previously owned and operated the now closed Frank Talk Art Bistro and Bookstore, 163 Shrewsbury Ave., in Red Bank, and currently has an online business Backward Glances, where Rogers uses family photos of their history for a series of postcards, that are in their own way an overview of African-American history through the 20th century.

Rogers is single with a 32-year-old daughter, Ashley. Rogers was born and raised in Elizabeth, moving to Red Bank about 30 years ago. "I love living in Red Bank," with the appeal of the community, its diversity and the way the community works so well with that diversity, she said. "That's why I love it here.

"Generally all of us in this little community are decent people," she observed.

On her refrigerator door, Rogers taped up a section of a Maya Angelou poem: "I love life/I love living life/I love the art of living."

"It speaks to my spirit," she said.

"I don't know where life is taking me. But I'm always looking for my next adventure," Rogers said, but then added, "but for a purpose," to that adventure, "not just fun and games."

For Rogers, "It's learning to live artfully," she said. "That's joyous."

By John Burton

DANNY SANCHEZ

