

Annette John-Hall | A patron saint for the black and overweight
By Annette John-Hall | Inquirer Columnist | August 2007

Angela J. calls herself the Darth Vader of Overeaters Anonymous.

She's the fallen angel pushing for cultural inclusion in the group she says saved her life. A proud pioneer advocating for diversity while on the road to recovery herself.

Plus, she's black - "a race-baiting heretic," she said and laughed.

She's only half-joking. For more than a decade, Angela J. - that initial is good enough for public identification, she assures me - has been on a mission to include more African Americans in OA.

In 1996, she started Ebony Overeaters Anonymous within OA for African Americans to address the special issues they face in their weight-loss struggles. In 1998, she launched an accompanying Web site, www.ebonyoa.org.

Starting today at the Loews Hotel, about 100 Ebony OA members from around the world will meet for their own retreat, two days of workshops, testimonies and spiritual programs, all with a cultural focus, before the OA's World Service Convention begins Thursday through Sept. 2, also at the Loews. Members from nearly 7,000 groups listen to "abstinent" speakers and learn strategies to resist overeating.

OA's only requirement for joining is a desire to stop compulsive eating. As well-intentioned and inclusive as it sounds, the traditional organization never took racial differences into account.

The why is as important as the how. Black folks face particular pressures - from living in high-crime areas, working at low-wage jobs, and dealing with the daily racism that saps self-esteem.

Those are just some of the issues traditional OA doesn't address.

Angela wants to create an environment where African Americans "can come into a room that helps them heal, helps them undo the damage of oppression.

"OA's [12-step] philosophy says you must suspend your ethnicity in order to recover," Angela says, "but . . . it wasn't teaching me how to live in my skin."

A quiet strength

I met Angela, 54, near AT&T Park in San Francisco, where she lives.

Funny, she doesn't look like Darth Vader. There's none of the shrillness you'd expect in an agitator. She's so subdued I had to strain to hear her.

At 5-foot-3, she looks as though she's a size 10 soaking wet, an eternity away from the 208-pound size 22 she was at her heaviest.

She wants to be clear: OA helped save her life. A self-described binger, she says she was digging her grave with her own fork.

"I came from a Christian background," she says. "Food was a byproduct of pleasure," and in church although there was no drinking or drugging, there sure was a lot of eating.

"In my house," she says, "it was, 'Praise God and pass the mashed potatoes.' "

Top

12-step success

OA's spiritually based program, modeled on the success of Alcoholics Anonymous, appealed to her. Angela could admit she was powerless over food (step 1) and turn her addiction over to a greater power (step 2). When faced with temptation, she could pray her way out of it (step 11).

But the more she became involved, the more troubled she was by the dichotomy in OA.

According to a recent Centers for Disease Control study, black women are 42 percent more likely to suffer from obesity and its attendant diseases - high blood pressure, diabetes - than white women.

Why was it then that African Americans, many of whom find support in religion, accounted for only 3 percent of OA members?

It was soon clear to Angela and other black members that for all its talk about inclusive fellowship and the emotional, physical and spiritual aspects of addiction, OA didn't address the cultural.

A longtime OA member named Vondalyn says Ebony OA has allowed her to purge emotionally as well as physically. She has "released" 50 of her 300 pounds and controlled her high-blood pressure.

Being among other African Americans is like therapy.

"When you live in the inner city, you have a lot of different issues. Like, how I grew up, a single mother raising children, living on a restricted income. . . . There's nothing like talking to people who have been there," she says. For example, she would like to lose another 50 pounds from her 6-foot-1 frame, but some white members might still consider her too heavy.

Since becoming one of two African Americans on OA's 16-member volunteer board, Angela has pushed a national resolution for diversity training among its leaders.

In black communities where obesity is at epidemic proportions, we need more leaders like her.

It's a matter of life and death.

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