

Profiles

Sharon Farmer, the first African-American woman to be Director of the White House Photography Office (and my wedding photographer!!!!) Written for the African-American National Biography, edited by Henry Louis Gates and published by the Oxford University Press in 2008

Farmer, Sharon (10 June 1951 -), photojournalist, was born Sharon Camille Farmer in Washington, D.C., the eldest of two children of Winifred Lancaster Farmer and George Thomas Farmer, both public school principals. Farmer's younger brother, Jonathan Lancaster Farmer, became an attorney while Farmer went on to chronicle history as a world-renowned photographer. Farmer's father, a physical education instructor and high-school football coach instilled a love of sports in his daughter. With devoted parents who were heavily involved in their children's lives, the community and in the school system, Farmer grew up participating in several activities including dance and music lessons and the D.C. Youth Symphony Orchestra. At Anacostia High School, Farmer wrote for the school's newspaper which offered her a glimpse into the career that would one day bring her national acclaim. Although Farmer wanted to attend a local college, her parents pushed her to leave her comfort zone. She then chose Ohio State University because of its football prowess and music department, where Farmer first majored in music.

Originally, Farmer planned a career as a concert bassoonist. However, one day, near the end of her sophomore year, Farmer watched a friend complete an assignment in the darkroom. Seeing the process of developing film led Farmer to change her major and eventually the course of her life. Farmer flourished at Ohio State, a school she loved for its vast opportunities. However that didn't stop her from taking the school to task when she encountered racial inequality. She wrote articles, took photos and became managing editor of the school's black publication, "Our Choking Times." Farmer also became chapter president of her sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Inc., an organization she remained active in long after college. Also, at Ohio State, she found several African American mentors whom she credited with encouraging the school's small black population to use any prejudice they encountered as a galvanizing, unifying force. This notion of rallying together, getting involved and working for change, stayed with Farmer through her professional life.

Farmer's always supportive parents paid her tuition at Ohio State and she supplemented their payments by working. She soon learned she could pull in far more money taking pictures than she made grilling burgers part time on campus. Farmer freelanced for the Columbus Call and Post, the local black newspaper and also took pictures at weddings, meetings and parties. During her last semester of college, Farmer interned at the Associated Press and although the international news agency offered her a job in Wisconsin after her graduation in December 1974, Farmer longed to be closer to home.

She returned to the nation's capital where she did newborn photography through a booking agency and then worked in a camera shop, while freelancing on the side. A member of the

singing group “Sweet Honey in the Rock” urged Farmer to work as an independent photographer and the group used her photograph on its second album cover. After that, Farmer worked for many other artists in DC and from 1979 to 1991 she freelanced for the Washington Post. Farmer would later say that the Post assignments became emotionally draining as she grew tired and frustrated with the abundance of negative stories about African Americans. Farmer and other freelancers also had pay disputes with the new management at the Post, which prompted a lawsuit by the Newspaper Guild. In the end, the dispute was settled with one freelance photographer being hired, a move that left Farmer disillusioned with labor unions and again searching for clients as a freelancer.

One of her assignments brought Farmer to Howard University’s journalism department newspaper, “The Community News,” where she took photos and reestablished the school’s student dark room. From there, she went on to teach photojournalism at American University and freelanced for clients including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, The Women’s Museum, filmmaker Michelle Parkerson, and others. Her work also appeared in the critically-acclaimed book and exhibit “Songs of My People.” From 1988 to 1999, Farmer also maintained a photography studio where she took head shots, including those for book jackets such as the one for Marita Golden’s “Long Distance Life.”

While Farmer made her living as a contract, on-call photographer, Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas began setting up a team in Washington as it began to look as if the Democrat, would become the nation’s 42nd president. Along with other photographers, Farmer sent a portfolio of her work to be considered for a spot on the White House photo team. Before her work was reviewed, Clinton’s chief photographer reached out to Farmer. For years, he’d watched her work in the Washington Post and hoped she’d join the president’s team when he took office in January 1993. Farmer did just that and helped chronicle the president’s two terms in the Oval Office. In 1999, she was promoted to Director of the White House Photography Office, making her the first female and only the second African-American to hold that prestigious post.

Being a photographer documenting presidential meetings with heads of state, private moments, signing of legislation and the president’s daily life, Farmer said she learned the real workings of government. “I learned if you don’t vote you don’t have a nickel or a dime,” Farmer later said. One encounter that stuck with Farmer was when Clinton met with and apologized to some of the surviving men who were deceived and left untreated during the now infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. She was also present when work of artist Henry Tanner was added to the White House collection, the first by an African-American painter. Other monumental photos that stood out to Farmer: visits by the Tuskegee Airmen, Clinton crying when he learned of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Clinton learning of the death of cabinet member Secretary Ron Brown. “Clinton was a real person,” Farmer later said. The trips to Africa also stayed with Farmer, as she later said those reminded her most of home and made her lament the racism America spread around the world.

After the Clinton administration ended, Farmer returned to the Associated Press and worked as a photo assignment editor for three years before re-entering politics as the official photographer for the Democratic presidential campaign of John Kerry and John Edwards, which lost to a second term of George W. Bush. When the Kerry-Edwards campaign team disbanded, Farmer didn’t

want to return to her photo editor position, for she longed to be outside of the office doing what she loved: taking photos. She continued freelancing, taking on projects in Africa with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in Jordan with the Global Warming Action Network and in Houston for the Essence Music Festival. For years, Farmer continued lecturing to classes, organizations and groups and, of course, taking photos.

Written by, Otesa Middleton Miles
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Further reading:

Songs of My People, edited by Eric Easter and Dudley M. Brooks (1992)