

50+ LifeStyle Profile

by Susan Bierman
Photographs by Peter Burg

Miss Jacqueline Jones

She stands with the mike in her hands — no band, no musical instruments except for her voice.

And that rich, silky voice begins to sing — “On a clear day, rise and look around you
And you'll see who you are.
On a clear day
How it will astound you
That the glow of your being outshines ev'ry star . . .”

The Club, Jazz Tastings (Maitland) is empty with tables set for the coming night's activities. It doesn't take much coaxing to get Miss Jacqueline Jones to begin her song. All the while, photographer Peter Burg is snapping pictures. He knows he's dealing with a professional. He doesn't even have to explain how he wants her to pose.

“She knows what she's doing,” he says.

Her Dad named her Jacqueline after a small French town where he found himself during World War II. In homage to the town and the couple who helped him while he was there, he wanted her to have that name. And he was thrilled when he found out she was using it professionally. She has tears in her eyes and voice as she tells the story.

Her Mom, Maxine Jackson, now living in Atlanta with her sister, Lydia, says, “She was born singing.”

After all, she had her “first professional gig” at age four at Easter Sunday Services held at Rev. Colman's First Baptist Church in Gary, Indiana. She sang, “Yes, Jesus Loves Me,” and says, “I believe it and it's still true.”

She is the oldest of 13 — four boys and nine girls, all singers — three as professionals. She was born in Gary, but she has lived and traveled throughout the United States and overseas, bringing song and joy wherever she goes.

She spent her growing up years being raised by her grandmother, Florence Claughton or Mama Claudy, as she was known. Her grandmother was an LPN and her mother was an LPN (licensed practical nurse). While Jackie and four of her siblings lived with her grandmother, her mother traveled around to VA hospitals — a traveling nurse — because according to Jackie, “that's what you had to do to make money. For a woman of color, that was it. That was really the only way for a black woman to



Jacqueline sang the National Anthem at the opening ceremonies for the 1994 Soccer World Cup.

make good money. She came home as often as she could, but if she needed to send money home, then the money came home instead of her.”

Jacqueline continued to sing, traveling with Darrington's Gospel Choir through Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio for six years from the age of eight to fifteen or sixteen. About a year before high school graduation, she informed her grandmother she wanted to pursue a singing career.

“She told me no, no, no,” Jacqueline remembers, “the world is full of enough black people being entertainers and basketball stars,” she said.

“My parents told me I could either go into music and move out, or get a degree in anything and at least they would know that I had a way to keep a roof over my head and food in my mouth,” she continues. “I got a college scholarship, but that would have taken too long to get a degree and I wanted to get back to singing. So becoming a licensed practical nurse only required two years of college then. That's what I chose.”

She went to Purdue University where she got her two-year degree. “Being a practical nurse you were able to get things done. I went to a site off of the University campus,” she says. “I then worked at Baumgarten hospital in Chicago for three years to satisfy requirements for my



Daughter Maxine, mother Maxine, and Jacqueline (three generations left to right) at daughter Maxine's wedding.

LPN practice, but I was singing the whole time."

She got her feet wet at little clubs and showrooms around the city in Gary and in Chicago and special events on the side.

She was singing on the last night of a doctors' convention at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago, when one of the physicians listening approached her and booked Jacqueline for the opening of her club in San Francisco. It started out as a six-week engagement and turned into eight months. She loved San Francisco and decided to stay, which she did for four years. And she continued to work off and on as an LPN.

"San Francisco is 'the Bomb' and always will be," Jacqueline says.

She tells me she hasn't had to put on her LPN uniform for 30 years now.

She left California and began traveling because she wanted to be the leader of the group. She found out that's the only way you can control your career. She joined groups as a team player so she could become a better chief.

And travel she has, all over the U.S. and Europe — Greenland, Iceland, and Germany. In addition, she traveled for the U.S.O. for 17 years to places like Germany, China, Sweden, Iceland (again), and Diego Garcia where she was the only woman there with 1500 men.

"What a feeling of power!" she quips.

She spent four years in Birmingham, Alabama, which began when she was stranded there in a snow storm. She met and married husband, Edgar Bishop, who owned and operated a non-profit black history entourage — Black Fire. And she divorced him there, too.

In 1980 she hit Florida for the first time for a date in Ft. Myers with a band called Sister Max. The whole band came down with Hong Kong flu. Instead of heading for Atlanta, Jacqueline wound up in Miami and put another band together.

Again fate intervened. Her band



Jacqueline with late husband Brent



Jacqueline with Davis Gaines, star of "Phantom of the Opera"

was supposed to sing for a wedding reception that never happened. Believe it or not, a boxing promoter, Jimmy Williams, heard her singing an impromptu song that night and arranged for her paid audition. That set her up in Florida.

She settled in Orlando in 1983, bringing her two children, Maxine Leneese and son, Allen Charles, to live here. And here she met Brent Ermlick, the love of her life. They were together 25 years and married for 14 of those years.

"The kids still call him Daddy to this day," she says. "He willingly took over fatherhood of my two children in addition to his own child. Even the grandkids call him Daddy."

Today, she proudly speaks not only of her daughter, a CPA, but glows as she speaks of her grandchildren, Brandon, Patrick, and Allaina, all Maxine's children. Allaina is named for Jacqueline's son, Allen Charles, who was tragically killed in a cycling accident.

She includes in her family Viky Bell, her sister by choice, who is Jacqueline's part-time manager and agent, whom she met in Orlando.

She has performed on cruise ships

(the WLOQ's Jazz Cruises), at Disney World at several venues, The House of Blues for six years, Light Up Orlando, Caruso's Palace and Blazing Pianos. In 1994, Jacqueline performed before a television audience of more than 300 million people when she sang the National Anthem for the opening ceremonies of Soccer World Cup. She traveled to Russia as one of 50 delegates for an international forum that included lawyers, entertainers, teachers and psychologists among others. That was the time of the Russian "glasnost" and just before the Berlin Wall came down.

She even appeared in a movie, "White Line Fever," with Jan Michael Vincent. If you see the movie, "watch for me, I'm there for an instant," she laughs.

In Sanford, she is the celebrity board member of Creative Sanford's Celery Soup, a group dedicated to restoring The Princess Theater, the original spot of Sanford's first theater. In addition she has contributed her time and talent to local fundraisers including AIDS Awareness Education fund-raisers, the United Negro College Fund, the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, the Coalition for the Homeless, and the American Cancer Society.

In 2009, Jacqueline was named Seminole County Artist of the Year by the the Seminole Cultural Arts Council and the Seminole County Board of County Commissioners, acknowledging her for her many contributions to the local performing arts. She was named "Grand Diva" by the Seminole Jazz Society.

She has worked with Grammy award winning jazz per-



former Mickey Carroll in *Mother J and the World Church* and is looking forward to continuing the association. To hear Jacqueline with Mickey Carroll, go to mickeycarroll.com and look for the video, "Song For My Son."

One theme that is present throughout her life story is her strong belief in God. She belongs to Grace Community Faith Church, Apopka, pastored by the Rev. Henry Wright.

"I sing in the choir humbly and joyfully," she says, "singing harmonies is one of my joys in life."

But her biggest challenge came on September 24, 1999. She suffered an aneurysm. An aneurysm is a bulging, weak area in the wall of an artery that supplies blood to the brain. In most cases, a brain aneurysm causes no symp-

toms and often goes unnoticed. In rare cases, the brain aneurysm ruptures, releasing blood into the skull causing a stroke.

In 1989 and 1990 she had knee replacements. According to Jacqueline, "I just keep on going. The energizer bunny is my mentor!"

Regarding the aneurysm, she prophetically says, "Through the grace of God, it was like being born again. I stepped out of the hospital ready to take on the challenges that were ahead. Through the wonderful people who supported me and the grace of God, Miss Jones is alive and well, embracing each day with a smile."

Remember to check out "J.J.'s Spotlight," Miss Jones' ongoing column on entertainment happenings throughout our Central Florida area. Watch for it in the summer issue of the 50+FYI LifeStyle Guide. ♦