

Mary Mitchell
(Chicago Sun-Times Columnist/Board Member)
By Tenese Johnson

I was granted an interview with the Chicago Sun-Times very own Mary Mitchell. The great thing about Ms. Mitchell is her accessibility; the welcoming aura she exudes eases rookie journalist's anxiety.

Mitchell became the first African-American legal secretary at the prestigious Chicago law firm of Seyfarth Shaw, LLP. Taking pride in her job she dedicated most of her time to Seyfarth Shaw and before she knew it, twenty years had passed.

"So I turned 40 years old. I have a big birthday party at the office I was working at and I just realized 'you're 40 years old, you don't have a degree'. To me it was like I wasted my life. And it was not because the salary was bad, it was not. I was just not living up to my full potential and that was a personal disappointment."

With her seniority in play, a promotion was in order but Mitchell was passed over for someone of a "younger, lighter persuasion". It hit her. The realization that the chances of women, especially African American women, advancing in the professional world depended abundantly on the level of education achieved. So she quit. Leaving the glass ceiling job behind and dedicated all her energy to schooling. With supportive children and husband behind her, she enrolled in Columbia College Chicago. While attending Columbia, she achieved an internship with the Chicago Sun-Times in 1990 and earned a B.A. degree, major in journalism in 1991. By applying herself, submitting writing samples, and showcasing her skills to her superiors, she became a full-time columnist for Chicago Sun-Times starting with the Sunday edition. Now a 23 year veteran of the Times, one can see her articles on the Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday editions of the Sun-Times. By harnessing her angst and life experience, her writing focused on Chicago minority quandaries. Mitchell views the city differently from other columnists. Discussing the truths most would just sweep under the rug.

"Times have changed since the time of Dr. King and Malcom X. Yes we've progressed but this city is still segregated. The neighborhoods split not only by ethnicity but by class as well. And the sad thing is everyone seems to be ok with this separation."

She doesn't allow the prestige of all the journalist awards she's won cast a shadow of superiority over her personality. These awards consist of: the Studs Terkel Award from the Chicago Media Workshop, Award of Excellence from the National Association of Black Journalists, and the Peter Lisagor Award from the Chicago Headliner Club to name a few, and the frequent appearances on television and radio.

"We weren't given these skills, these talents, to keep them hidden and elevate only ourselves. They were bestowed upon us to enrich others' lives and help them grow. I don't understand people in high positions not willing to help boost those in lower ones to a better level. We are all a part of this world whether we like it or not and the only way we can survive as a people is by using our talents to make the world a better place."