

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE WHO LOOK LIKE ME: *An Interview with Artist Erica Keith*

BY ALITA BYRD

Erica Keith talks about the new 2021 calendar she has created, art directing at Hallmark, and why representation matters.

Question: You have created a Women of the Bible wall calendar for 2021, with beautiful drawings and Bible verses. What gave you the idea to create this calendar?

Answer: One of the earliest memories that I have is my mom reading the *My Bible Friends* book series to me and my sisters. I remember enjoying the stories—but my favorite part was looking at the pictures. Even though I enjoyed the books I always had this nagging feeling that none of the characters in the books looked like me. I got the same feeling reading my Sabbath School lesson and also seeing my Sabbath School teacher put the little felt people up on the felt board.

I’ve carried that feeling with me throughout my Adventist education at Larchwood Seventh-day Adventist Elementary and Pine Forge Academy. Now that I am a

mother of three beautiful Black children, I want to make sure they see themselves in the Word. Representation matters!

This pandemic has made us all slow down a little bit and do lots of things differently. If there is one thing that quarantine has done for me it’s getting me back to my creativity. So, in the evenings after work, after cooking dinner and after baths and prayer time with the kids, I started sketching on my new iPad Pro.

I’ve always enjoyed drawing women—in particular Black women. So, then I had a thought: What if I create illustrations of women in the Bible the way that I would like to see them? What if I create a devotional book? That’s where it all started. It wasn’t until recently that I thought it would be a nice 2021 calendar. After such a crazy 2020 year I knew that we were all looking forward to 2021!

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Where did you find inspiration to create the look of each biblical character?

I actually looked at my own family and friends for inspiration. I truly wanted the calendar to have a feeling of familiarity. So, if you are looking at some of the women that I illustrated and feel that some of them look familiar, it's because they may very well be inspired by someone you know.

I also surround myself with *Essence* magazines, Pinterest, Tumblr, Instagram, and other places for inspiration. I specifically looked at beauty, fashion, African textures, textiles, and more to pull from and then I began composing my layout.

Do you feel that women are under-represented in the Bible?

I don't necessarily feel that women are under-represented in the Bible, but I do feel as though most sermons, although very enlightening, focus on men in the Bible. When I read stories about the women in the Bible, I see strength, courage, and wisdom. I see inspiring stories that need to be shared.

Who did you make this calendar for?

I was inspired to create the calendar for this year because I knew people wanted something to look forward to. I wanted to create something that would lift spirits and provide inspiration.

Have you sold very many?

The calendar is doing very well. Lots of orders came in before the holiday and I am still receiving calls and messages from people telling me how much they love the calendar. Even though we are well into the year now, people are still making purchases.

Has your church family in Philadelphia been supportive of the project?

The Germantown church has always been supportive of me in all of my life stages and ventures. Many of the church members have purchased calendars for themselves and as gifts for others in their life.

One member was a bit upset that her calendar was delayed due to the USPS mail delays over the holidays. It took about ten days longer but when she received her calendar, she told me that it was worth the wait.

You are producing the calendar yourself, through your small business, right? Are the calendars printed on demand when they are ordered?

Yes, the calendars are printed on demand. I knew that I didn't have the space or capacity to handle inventory, so I found a vendor who has been amazing.

Where can people buy the calendar?

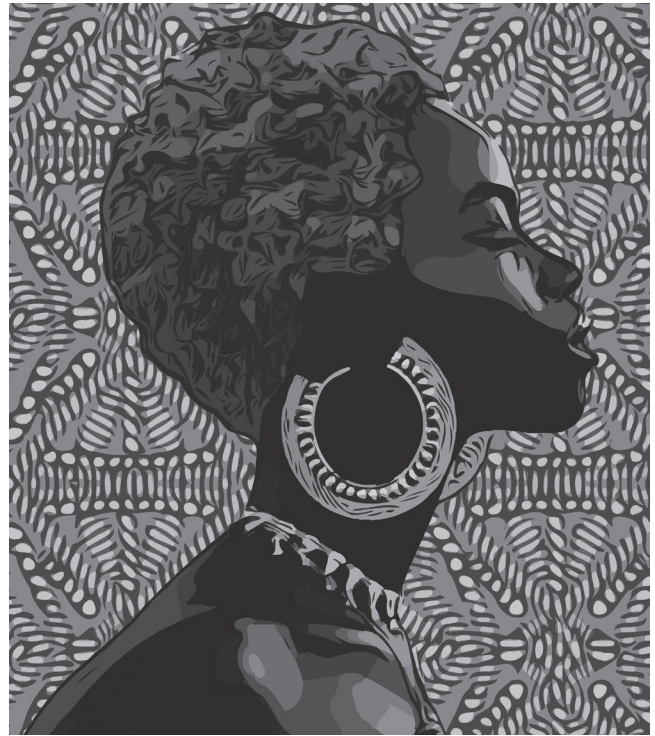
The calendar and all of the other created products can be found at www.blackforwardshop.com.

Your business is called Black Forward. What does





Elizabeth (left) and Hannah (right)



your company do?

Black Forward was founded in September 2020. After the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, I felt compelled to use my gifts to help bring awareness to the injustices going on in our country and to bring empowerment to the Black community.

We sell apparel, accessories, greeting cards, tote bags, a calendar, and more that have a strong aesthetic and proud messages. Each piece has been either crafted or curated by me.

I have also collaborated with Black artists and writers to promote products with a strong aesthetic and a proud message.

But you have a full-time job at a marketing company, is that right?

Up until January 1, I was the creative director at Innovairre Communication, directing the marketing of products for our non-profit clients.

I was asked if I would head up our new Diversity and Inclusion Department because the company knows how passionate I am about diversity, equity, and inclusion and they also realize how important this is for our organization. So for the first time in my corporate career, I have stepped out of the creative field and on to something that I am equally passionate about.

You were an art director for Hallmark Cards for eight years. What was it like to work for Hallmark? What were some of the projects you worked on there?

Working for Hallmark was one of the most amazing experiences that I've ever had. I was hired right out of school and started working as a graphic designer.

In 2005, a writer colleague, Dierdra Zollar, and I created a collection of cards called "Uplifted!" for the Hallmark Mahogany line. It featured my artwork, and she did the writing. The collection performed well, and I still get people asking about it more than 15 years later.

After that, I began art directing many different card



Jill Scott and Erica Keith have fun after a work session

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lines, including many years directing the Mahogany card line, celebrating Black culture. It was pretty cool that I even worked on some Dayspring cards (the Hallmark card line celebrating faith) as well.

One of my most exciting experiences was partnering with singer, songwriter, and Grammy winner Jill Scott to create a collection of cards. She is so talented, and she was a pleasure to work with.

I also was blessed to create products for Dr. Maya Angelou, Iyanla Vanzant, and T. D. Jakes.

It seems that in all of your work, you have tried to raise up Black women. You have worked to make Black women more visible and more represented. Do you feel like things are changing for the better, since the time you began working? How do you feel things have changed during the last few years in our culture and society?

In my earlier years, the raising up of Black women was something that I did unconsciously. Being surrounded by five sisters and living in the girls' dorm at Pine Forge Academy, it was natural for me to illustrate and create images of Black women.

When I worked as a designer and art director for the Mahogany card line, we had specific strategies that we followed to make sure we represented Black people with significance, with strength and beauty.

It wasn't until recent years that I felt it was my own responsibility to not only elevate and represent Black women in a positive light, but to also do the same for Black men and children.

Recently my focus has been on social justice, not because it's been a topic in the news of late, but because I am raising three Black children to see themselves and know their worth, value, and rights in this country. I feel

as though people are waking up to finally recognizing the racial disparities.

This global pandemic and the way our lives have changed dramatically has put us all in a position to slow down and look at things differently. The unarmed deaths of Black people have been an alarm for people all over the country. Awareness is the first step, but change is going to be a continuous process and must be a united effort for all of us.

It's my hope that putting images of women in the Bible who look different than what has been the norm is a step in the right direction.

What do you think the Adventist Church can do to further this work? What can the Adventist Church do better when it comes to raising up Black women?

Furthering the work will require this issue to be addressed at every level of the church—from the local church, regional conference, union, and General Conference to the global level.

Much of our church is still organized and functions from segregation and a racially separate standpoint. Our Sabbath School and book publications still are unequal in the images that they include. They need to represent Black people and women even more. It's important because if our books and images do not represent the landscape of our country and world, we as a church will not be relatable.

The Pew Research Center states that by 2050, the nation's racial and ethnic mix will look quite different than it does now. Non-Hispanic whites, who made up 67% of the population in 2005, will be just 47% in 2050. Hispanics will rise from 14% of the population in 2005 to 29% in 2050. Blacks made up 13% of the population in 2005 and will be roughly the same proportion in 2050.

Asians, who were 5% of the population in 2005, will be 9% in 2050.

A 2014 Religious Landscape Study also states that Black women are more religious than any other group in the U.S. So, if we as Adventists are not mindful in representation now, we could be on a path to losing members.

Can you tell us more about your family?

My husband Germaine, my parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends have been the most supportive of me as I have embarked on creating this calendar and other projects that I've been working on. They believe in me so strongly that they are the ones who truly keep me going. When I am up late at night drawing, editing my website, or doing something else for my business, I hear their voices encouraging me to keep going.

What other projects are you working on?

I am also a freelance art director and graphic designer. One of the projects that I have been working on for the last year-and-a-half is all of the branding and promotional materials for the National Pine Forge



Erica Keith with her family

Academy Alumni Association. I feel it is important to give back to the institution that poured so much into me for four of the most important developmental years of my life. Pine Forge Academy is one amazing Historically Black Co-Educational Christian Boarding School and if I can help to promote the school then I want to do my part.

Where do you see yourself in five to ten years' time?

In the next five to ten years I see myself continuing to do work that elevates the Black community and to bring us into the foreground in a positive way.

This country was founded on racism and every system was born out of that very thing. There is so much reconciliation, healing, and restructuring that needs to happen, and I feel that I need to be a part of that movement. I don't know exactly what that will look like for me, but I am going to use the gifts that God has given me to further this important work.



Erica Keith is the founder and CEO of Black Forward

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