

BFFWomenJournalists-VIII: Last November, I heard Christiane Amanpour speak of how the free press is in fact, “the BFF of the people and not the enemy of the people as has been touted and shouted the past couple of years from the White House. Enough, with this other language,” she continued, “we are best friends to all of you because we ... go to all the dangerous places, talk to all the dangerous people, and bring back the truth, the facts and the evidence. What more friendly thing could we do?”

Exactly! And I thought, what a splendid theme she has for a book. What more friendly thing could she do?

Inspired by her words, I wrote a column on historic BFF women journalists. It became a series of which this is my eighth and final column as it is now time for me to reach out to Ms. Amanpour to suggest she write that book about BFF journalists and the free press. What more friendly thing could I do?

Gwen Ifill (1955-2016) was born in the Queens neighborhood of Jamaica in New York City, the fifth of six children to her parents Eleanor from Barbados and Orville, a Panamanian minister of Barbadian descent who emigrated from Panama. Growing up, Gwen lived in church parsonages in Pennsylvania, in Massachusetts, and in federally subsidized housing in Buffalo and in New York City.

She earned her BA in communications from Simmons College, a women's college in Boston. While at Simmons, she wrote for student publications and interned for the *Boston Herald-American* where one day she discovered a note on her desk that read, "Nigger go home." The editors were horrified and offered her a job upon her graduation in 1977.



Ifill went on to work for *the Baltimore Evening Sun* from 1981 to 1984 and then for *The Washington Post* until 1991. She left the *Post* after being told she wasn't ready to cover Capitol Hill and was immediately hired by *The New York Times* where she covered the White House until 1994. That same year she began her first job in television with NBC where she became the network's chief congressional, Capitol Hill reporter. She then moved to PBS mid-career to spend a little more time on stories and avoid sensationalism.

By 1999, Ifill was a senior correspondent for the “PBS News Hour” and was named moderator of the PBS weekly TV program “Washington Week in Review,” becoming the first black woman to host a national political talk show on television. Each week she led a roundtable discussion with award-winning journalists providing reports and analysis of the major stories from the nation’s capital.

Ifill was known for her accurate and unbiased reporting and for not wanting her audience to know her opinions. She wanted to engage them in important issues of the day. Her fair and thoughtful reporting developed an audience that looked to her as a trusted voice in a changing media landscape. In 2004, she was the first black woman to moderate a televised vice-presidential debate between Republican Dick Cheney and Democrat John Edwards and she moderated her second vice-presidential debate between Democrat Joe Biden and Republican Sarah Palin in 2008.

In 2008 Ifill's Washington Week program began what would become long tradition of special election broadcasts with live-audience events at both national political conventions allowing voters to interact with her and her weekly panelists on issues of the election. These shows earned "Washington Week" a 2008 Peabody Award. The award committee cited the program as the "gold standard" in reporting indisputable factual rather than disputable opinionated information of election issues. It is in its 50th year on the air.

When her political objectivity was questioned by conservatives prior the 2008 debate because of her soon-to-be released book, *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama*, the Republican presidential nominee John McCain said. "I think she will do a totally objective job because she is a highly respected professional." Ms. Ifill objectively commented that: "No one's ever assumed a white reporter can't cover a white candidate."



The nationally televised "PBS News Hour" named Ifill and Judy Woodruff as co-anchors and co-managing editors in 2013.

In September 2014, Ifill moderated "America After Ferguson," discussing the many issues facing communities in the wake of Michael Brown's shooting and death by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. In September 2015, she moderated "America After Charleston," examining the issues propelled into public discourse after a white gunman shot and killed nine black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in June 2015.

In June 2016, she moderated a town meeting in Elkhart, Indiana, with President Obama, exploring voters' choices. That same year, she and Woodruff moderated the debate between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, the first team of women to moderate a Democratic presidential debate.

In addition to the Peabody, Ifill received more than 41 honorary doctorates from universities around the world and awards too numerous to mention in this column. But, primary among them are:

Harvard University's Goldsmith Career Award for Excellence in Journalism in 2009; she was inducted into the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame in 2012; in November 2015 she accepted the Lifetime Achievement award from the Women's Media Center at the annual Women's Media Awards ceremony; and Columbia University awarded her the John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism in 2016 to be presented to her, personally, but she passed away two days prior the scheduled ceremony and six days after the Presidential election.

President Barack Obama spoke about the passing of this pioneering journalist who broke through barriers of racial prejudice and gender bias saying: "Whether she reported from the convention floor or from the field, whether she sat at the debate moderator's table or the anchor's desk, she not only informed today's citizens, she also inspired tomorrow's journalists."

On the one-year anniversary of her death, November 14, 2017, Ifill's alma mater Simmons College announced that they would be launching a school in 2018 named in her honor as the **Gwen Ifill College of Media, Arts and Humanities**.

The College aims to carry on her legacy for future generations which once she, herself, so aptly noted: "I'm very keen about the fact that a little girl now, watching the news, when they see me and [white] Judy [Woodruff] sitting side by side, it will occur to them that that's perfectly normal—that it won't seem like any big breakthrough at all." - Gwen Ifill

Sources:

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<https://www.pbs.org/weta/washingtonweek/profile/gwen-ifill>

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nd0Blxbgpuw>