



SARAN BYNUM

Finds

“Joy”

“Joy”

in 5th
Dimension
Studioz
and the
Creative Arts

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

PHOTO COURTESY OF SARAN BYNUM

When Saran Bynum, as an adult, learned that her first name – if pronounced as Sir-on – translated into the word “joy” in a West African native language, she immediately adopted that pronunciation as her preferred calling card. Until that time, she and everyone else around her had been pronouncing it the same way as the food wrapping paper.

That would be a fitting way to describe her. Saran is joyful for the creative gifts she has been blessed with as an actor, writer, film and stage director, acting coach, set designer, publicist, and public speaker.

“I love everything I do that’s creative,” Saran said. “I’m just trying to live my life in a positive way and not let anything stress me out.”

At present, Saran is busy promoting the day-long Treme Festival founded by her uncle and aunt, Adolph Bynum Sr., and Naydja Bynum. It will feature local foods, crafts, musical performances and a second line parade through Treme. The festival is set for Saturday, October 26 in the 1100 block of Henriette Delille Street adjacent to St. Augustine Catholic Church.

Saran is also working on a musical to be performed in Washington, D.C. in November 2025, commemorating 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon. This project, titled “Vietnamerica,” is of personal interest to her because she is half-Vietnamese herself, born to a Vietnamese woman and an African American soldier who was stationed in Saigon when the city fell to the Viet Cong in May 1975.

“I was originally named Trang Nguyen, and was one of many Amer-Asian babies born to Vietnamese women and American servicemen stationed there,” Saran explained. “After the fall of South Vietnam,

I was abandoned by my biological mother and cared for by nuns in an orphanage housed in former army barracks vacated by American servicemen.”

Soon after the war’s end, President Gerald Ford called for an emergency airlift to fly the orphaned Amer-Asian babies out of Vietnam to Hawaii where Catholic Charities assisted in finding homes for them in the U.S., Canada and Europe. Saran was one of those infants rescued in what came to be known as “Operation Baby Lift.”

As Saran describes it, “My mom’s sister in New York heard about the announcement that babies would be coming here from Vietnam and they will be available for adoption. So my aunt told my mom, ‘Maybe this is your time to adopt.’ So they went through Catholic Charities and they were given some pictures of me and that’s how I got here.”

Adopted by Horace Bynum Jr. and his wife, Dr. Eunice Hodges, Saran was raised in the Gentilly Woods neighborhood of New Orleans. She attended grade school at Claiborne Elementary and high school at St. James Major. She went on to attend UNO and Delgado Junior College before graduating from Xavier University.

“I got my start in the performing arts while I was still in grade school, acting in the drama ministry at Franklin Avenue



Saran with Jordan Peele on the set of Keanu. She was Tiffany Haddish's Stand In



Babydoll Chyna at Treme Under the Bridge Fest. PHOTO BY HENRY YORK

Baptist Church,” Saran said. “We would travel to Angola and other places to do dramatic presentations and I did a lot of that.”



Saran holds a photo of her biological father, Charles Wesson in honor of Vietnamese Veterans Celebration at City Hall. Pictured with veterans who served in Vietnam for the South.



Saran with Cyndi Nguyen at the Children’s Museum, hosted Vietnamese Day with the children and their families. We serve as Commission Members of the 50th Anniversary of the Fall of Saigon.



Saran at her movie screening of “Where I Stand” at the Broad Theater

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SARAN BYNUM

While at St. James Major she did set design and helped build props for shows the school presented. She also discovered her love for dancing around this time, thanks to one of her grandmothers.

“She would always put me in the middle of the room when we were at family functions and I’d perform,” Saran recalled. “So I would do a little dance performance for my family, and my grandmother would encourage me and that’s basically how it all started for me performing in front of people.”

She also took ballet classes at a school in Metairie and her love for live theatre was sparked by annual visits to New York City with her family where she had the opportunity to see Broadway shows.

Fresh out of Xavier with an MFA degree in Arts and Business, Saran went to work for the Arts Council of New Orleans



Saran at Flavor Unit Entertainment office in Jersey City. Former assistant to Queen Latifah and Shakim Commperre.



Saran next to Eugene Green. She among other Theater Producers received a Proclamation to launch African American Theater Season in New Orleans.

conducting business workshops for actors, musicians and visual artists. During that time, she helped organize a series of art displays in the lobbies of various corporate offices in downtown New Orleans. Working closely with Rosa Langley in the Mayor’s Office of Economic Development, Saran was the lead curator for gathering up the works of local artists for these displays.

As an actor and stand-in for major stars, as well as an editor, executive producer, writer and director, Saran has seven listings in the prestigious Internet Media Database, some of which included speaking roles. She has also stood-in for Tiffany Haddish, Jurnee Smollet and Rapper Eve in other films.

Following Hurricane Katrina, which displaced her family, by then living in New Orleans East, Saran spent several years living and working in the New York area. During her stay there, she was selected to appear on the TV show, “Cover Shot,” where she shared her story of survival from the Vietnam War and she was featured on a bulletin board in Times Square. In 2010 her story, along with those of other Amer-Asians, was featured in an article for Smithsonian magazine.

Also, while in the New York Metro Area, Saran worked as an assistant to Queen Latifa, in her Jersey City, New Jersey studio. “I stayed with her for four years and that’s where I got my bug for the entertainment industry,” she said.

The experience inspired her to set up her own production company, 5th Dimension Studioz, when she returned to New Orleans.

Locally, Saran takes pride in being a Culture Bearer for 15 years as a Babydoll Chyna Doll. In recognition of her ten years as a Culture Bearer, she was awarded the Babydoll Sisterhood Award from the Babydoll Sisterhood Organization.

But, despite all the honors and accomplishments, there was one thing in particular that constantly preyed on Saran’s mind: finding her biological family. She finally did, in 2023, through Ancestry.com, and she learned that her father was a U.S.

army soldier named Charles Wesson, who died in 2016.

She also learned that she had a brother, as well as two aunts and four uncles from the Wesson side of the family. On her birthday in 2023 the family members traveled from Memphis to meet Saran in New Orleans. However, she has not been able to track down her Vietnamese birth mother, which is a source of disappointment to her.

Today, Saran is largely focused on the “Vietnam: The Musical” project which she was brought in to co-write and direct. Originally produced as a documentary by Nancy Bui, the production will feature three characters who escaped Vietnam when it fell to the Viet Cong, one of whom is modeled after Saran in the years after she was safely airlifted.

She is serving as Commissioner for the 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and participating in the opening exhibit of the event at the Historic New Orleans Collection on April 4, 2025. Following the musical’s performances in Washington, Saran hinted that New Orleans would be the next venue for the production.

“Despite being born in a war-torn country and being abandoned, I believe it was by God’s grace that I survived and can accomplish great things. Being able to inspire others and share my love is the best gift I can both give and receive.”

