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Thursday, April 11, 2013 | 3:58 PM

EXCLUSIVE: Tracey Edmonds Dishes on Her New YouTube Network and Hollywood Staying Power

By Charreah K. Jackson



With laser focus and an easy smile, Tracey Edmonds has built a 20-year career producing hugely successful television and film projects including *Soul Food* and *Jumping the Broom*. Her latest role is president of the newly launched YouTube premium channel, Alright TV. The mom of two dishes to ESSENCE.com on why Black women should tune in to the new inspiration network, what it's like working with her boyfriend Deion Sanders and how she has found solid ground in Tinseltown.

ESSENCE.com: Congrats on the launch of Alright TV. What was your motivation in creating this channel?

TRACEY EDMONDS: A year and a half ago I started tweeting something inspirational every morning to keep people going. I got so many tweets back and had no idea how much it helped others. I realized people were really hungry to be uplifted and inspired. I had been working on a business plan for a cable network of inspirational programming and YouTube was the perfect partnership. We offer high entertainment value alongside a message, without beating people over the head.

ESSENCE.com: And you definitely are bringing the entertainment with Issa Rae and more on the network.

EDMONDS: I love Issa Rae! We are doing a choir series with her to take a fun look at everything that happens in a church choir including relationships and choir competitions. Ever Sunday we also live stream church services from Bishop T.D. Jakes and many others. This network is more modern and progressive than traditional gospel networks. We may surprise people. We have a dating web series for singles. Ms. Right stars DeRay Davis and pokes fun at the prototypes men deal with when dating. Mr. Right features Kali Hawk, as a woman searching for love. Our message is whatever you are going through, you are not alone. If you haven't met Mr. Right yet, that's ok. Stay optimistic because one day you will.

ESSENCE.com: We also see Deion Sanders, who you are dating, has a few shows on your network. How is it working with him and also being in a relationship?

EDMONDS: He's been wonderful. He's one of the most positive people I know. On the network, Deion hosts Sports Dad where he comes to the rescue of sports-obsessed dads who are pushing their kids too hard. He's also doing an inspirational blog. I met Deion through business and had a chance to see the wonderful man he is.

ESSENCE.com: With so many "wives of" shows now that feature women whose claim to fame is who they dated, you have built your own brand. Was that always a goal?

EDMONDS: I come from a single parent household and the majority of my childhood was seeing my mom work. When I was 13, I started working as a receptionist at my mom's office in the summer. We were always figuring out how to get all our bills paid and my check went towards household bills. I've always been an independent woman and wanted to be sure I was okay financially, regardless of what happened in my personal life. I'm an optimist and hope for the best in a

relationship. But life throws you curves and you never know when the fairytale is going to end. For women, it's important to be able to stand on your own. I had great memories and great years with Kenny ["Babyface" Edmonds]. I also had my own vision. When you build a brand, you have to know you are putting a spotlight on yourself and you have to carry yourself correctly.

ESSENCE.com: What strategies have been most effective for you in managing being a mom and pursuing your professional goals?

EDMONDS: It is challenging. My biggest challenge is wishing I could clone myself and be in two places at once. I often face whether I will go to my son Dillon's basketball game or a board meeting at the same time. Ninety-nine of the time I am going to the basketball game so I have to explain to people why I can't be at certain places. The years have flown by. When I pitched *Soul Food*, I was six months pregnant with Brandon. He's 16 now. It is so important as a mom to carve quality time with your kids.

ESSENCE.com: You have thrived in a male-dominated field. What quality has been most beneficial to your success?

EDMONDS: Being thick-skinned and staying focused. There is a lot of rejection and I still get rejected all the time. I learned when someone tells you no, that gives you an opportunity to find another way. I got so many no's for *Soul Food*. I went to every studio and was told no. They asked, 'Where's your audience? Who's going to go see it?' There was nothing to compare it to and *Soul Food* was an anomaly. The last studio was Fox 2000. Producer Laura Ziskin realized this was a universal story about family and green lit the movie. That was my first producing experience and opened the door for so much more. If I had stopped with the first no's I got, I might not be where I am now.

ESSENCE.com: How has Hollywood and the business evolved since you started out and what's next for you?

EDMONDS: In all honesty, when I first started there were more opportunities for projects of color. There were at least seven distributors doing African-American films. Nowadays, it's maybe two or three. That leaves fewer slots to get a film through and fewer opportunities to direct or produce. We are seeing the same with television. The good news is things are beginning to segue way online, which is global. A channel like Alright is reaching the entire world on YouTube and a wonderful opportunity to get positive images out to the world. There is a *Jumping the Broom* sequel in the works and I am also producing a *Basketball Wives* movie with Shaunie O'Neal. It's not based on the show and is an uplifting story with a lot of twists.

Visit youtube.com/alrighttv to check out new series from Alright TV.

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