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Preaching Everywhere, Even in Her Dreams

By JANE GROSS

When the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook left her 13-year-old ministry at the Mariner's Temple in Lower Manhattan to found a new Baptist congregation in the Bronx neighborhood where she was raised, she recorded a television commercial. Its message: "It's more than a church. It's an experience."

Call it self-promotion. Call it pizzazz. Call it chutzpah, not a foreign concept when your family was among the first to integrate a once Jewish apartment building on the Grand Concourse. Or chalk it up to Sujay, as Ms. Johnson Cook is known, a larger-than-life performer.

"I'm going to make you love me," she says. "I'm going to hug you until you hug back."

She dares you to resist. But her charismatic oratory (think Billy Graham and Oprah rolled into one), her formidable appearance (5 feet 10 inches tall and dressed to kill in a maroon suite from Rodeo Drive) and her bracing self-confidence ("If a door opens, I walk through") leave their mark.

Ms. Johnson Cook is always preaching. She preaches from the pulpit of the seven-year-old Bronx Christian Fellowship Church, now in a permanent home near the Bronx Botanical Gardens. She preaches on the lecture circuit and in her self-help books, including "A New Dating Attitude: Getting Ready for the Mate God Has Made For You" and "Too Blessed to Be Stressed: Words of Wisdom for Women on the Move."

She preaches at a weekly lunchtime service downtown, called "The Hour of Power," where hundreds of government workers enjoy a sermon and a sandwich. She preaches on 5 a.m. power walks, called "Fine, Fit and Fabulous," that she leads at the Mullaly Park sports complex near Yankee

Stadium, where she played basketball as a child. She preaches at subway stops, pumping hands as she saw her older brother do, when he ran for State Assembly in the late 1970's.

And now she will be preaching at the annual meeting of the Hampton Ministers Conference, the largest gathering of African-American clergy members in the world. Last month she was elected president of the 10,000-member group, representing as many as five million churchgoers. At 45, she is the first woman to hold the post.

Ms. Johnson Cook's resume is a catalog of firsts.

As a child, when her mother, a schoolteacher, and father, a trolley car driver, founded a security guard business, the family moved from a Harlem tenement to a home in the Gun Hill section of the Bronx, integrating a largely white neighborhood and planting themselves firmly in the emerging black middle class.

Young Sujay was one of the few black children at the Riverdale Country Day School. Her parents helped organize a black PTA group that managed a quorum only because it included families from the nearby Horace Mann and Fieldston schools.

Success was expected of Sujay, who studied acting and singing at Emerson College in Boston and got a masters in education at Columbia University, and her older brother, Charles, a graduate of Dartmouth College and the Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California at Berkeley. She was a television producer for public affairs programming in both Washington and Boston, going to seminary at night.

Soon, Ms. Johnson Cook noticed that she was preaching in her dreams, a sign she had been called. Her next job, in the public relations department at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center, was a means to pay for divinity school. Her first assignment was as youth minister in her father's church, Union Baptist in Harlem. At 26, she became the first female minister in the 200-year-old American Baptist Church when she was named senior pastor at the Mariner's Temple, a faltering congregation with barely a dozen members, which she turned into a thriving ministry.

She was appointed the first female chaplain in the New York City Police Department, a White House fellow during the Clinton administration, a member of President Clinton's commission on race and a visiting professor at the Harvard Divinity School. She turned down a job as an assistant federal secretary of housing under Henry G. Cisneros, who wanted the Ms. Johnson Cook to put black clergy members to work in the nation's housing projects. She had a husband who missed her, one son and another on the way. It was time to go home.

But where was home? An hour's drive down the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive to the Mariner's Temple? Or a storefront congregation on the Grand Concourse, only blocks from the building where Ms. Johnson Cook and her family live on the sixth floor, her brother and sister-in-law on the 16th and her widowed mother on the 20th? The Mariner's Temple would mean more of the same; the storefront a new challenge and the opportunity to pick up her sons, Samuel, 10 and Christopher, 7 from school and take them to baseball practice.

Her Bronx church is the spiritual home to 450 families, mostly civil servants like her parents, enough for two services each Sunday. Sometimes she squeezes in a third, at the huge Convent Avenue Baptist Church where her husband, Ron is an administrator and where the couple met during a Lenten fast.

She has come full circle, even in her Sunday itinerary. As children, she and her brother would start the day at Bible school at Eastchester Presbyterian Church in their neighborhood, then board the No. 5 train to join their mother for the 11 a.m. service at Rendall Presbyterian in Harlem. Worship would continue 10 blocks and a few hours later at her father's church, where the Baptists were just getting warmed up.

"Church," she said, "Was always the common ground."