

“People like me to be mean.”
—Vanessa Williams

ENTERTAINMENT MATTERS

A La Mode: Vanessa Williams talks about “Ugly Betty,” her new award-winning movie, and the cause closest to her heart—Special Olympics

by David Michael Conner

Today anyone with a television knows Vanessa Williams best as Wilhelmina Slater, the power-hungry fashion magazine executive who almost single-handedly brings soulless fun to the ABC hit show *Ugly Betty*. Though the show helped her make “one of the most startling and unexpected comebacks in show business history,” as the Internet Movie Database describes her resurgence, Williams has been busy on and off the radar since her career began.

Williams has been and remains a major recording artist, with a string of hits in the 1990s ranging from dance music to ballads, one of the most remarkable Disney animated film singles (*Pocahontas*’s “Colors of the Wind”) and her bluesy takes on holiday standards. Her dramatic acting chops are proven in films like *Soul Food* and the recent independent film *My Brother*, in which she plays the terminally ill mother of

two boys, one of whom lives with intellectual disability. (She was named Best Actress for this role at the Harlem International Film Festival, and the film won the Best Picture Jury Award at the



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The actress, seen here in character as chilly Wilhelmina “Willy” Slater on *Ugly Betty*, talks about her little-known agenda...

American Black Film Festival.) And of her role as “The Witch” in the Broadway musical *Into the Woods*, the *New York Times* wrote this: “Ms. Williams is a...qualified success as the Witch, who is transformed from crone-like grotesqueness into dazzling beauty. She sings appealingly, and she is excellent in conveying the cool, pragmatist side of her character when crisis looms.”

Having had the opportunity to sit down with Williams recently, I can attest to accounts of her dazzling beauty—but even more, I was struck by her intellect and dedication to a cause near and dear to her. That cause is intellectual disability, which Williams can by now

be called an expert on thanks to her fifteen years of work with the Special Olympics, for which she serves as a board director.

Special Beginnings

Williams told me that her work with Special Olympics began when she was asked to perform a song on the second “A Very Special Christmas” album. The album was “the brain child of Bobby Shriver, who is Eunice Shriver’s son and Maria [Shriver’s] brother,” she said. “He also lives in L.A. and is plugged into the entertainment business.

“I recorded [“What Child is This”] back in 1992. I met the Shriver family and was introduced to the Special Olympics movement and then a seat became open on the international board around 2000. Maria asked me if I would be interested in taking the slot. So I came onto the board and I’ve spent over seven years on the international board.

“We meet twice a year, usually once abroad, with Special Olympics board directors all over the world. We had an event in South Africa with Nelson Mandela, we had games in Dublin back in 2003, we had the Nagano games a couple of years ago and this year we’re in Shanghai. And also from those particular meetings you end up having relationships with people all over the world.

“I visited people in Egypt on vacation, one of the board directors in Cairo. She invited me to her home and took me to the school she established. A whole section of her school is devoted to our athletes and students with intellectual disabilities. So I’ve been able to see how her program works. There was nothing like it in Egypt, even

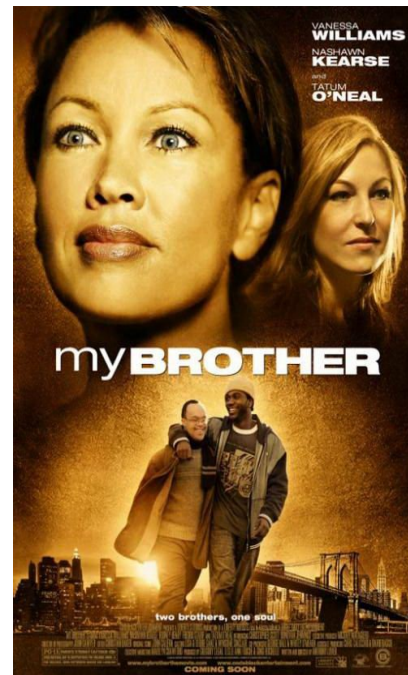
in Cairo. I think that people probably think that Special Olympics is a game, a series of events that give gold medals to people with intellectual disabilities, which is the short of the long in terms of our global work. I mean, we have a wellness program that provides dental and health checkups to people who are a neglected part of our society worldwide.”

Williams has a starring role in the recently released feature film *My Brother*, in which she plays the mother of an intellectually disabled son.

“A Great Team”

Was the *My Brother* role part of her intellectual disabilities work, or just a coincidence?

“Completely coincidental!



Williams won several Best Actress awards for her role as the mother of an intellectually disabled son in the critically acclaimed *My Brother*

Anthony Lover, who directed and wrote the film gave me the script and said I wrote this for you because I knew that you could bring what's needed to this character because only you could have done it, and I said that what you don't realize is that I work with Special Olympics and this will be *a great team*.

"We shot that film two years ago and we had a screening in Washington, D.C., and as I told the audience, when I read the script people said that this movie would not be able to be made, there's not going to be an audience that would care to watch it or embrace it. It was 'I can't, I can't, I can't.' It's actually really important to me that people do because of my involvement with this issue. I know there is an audience."

After limited release, *My Brother* is set for wide DVD release on May 29, 2008.

Picture This

Williams was in Washington for a special screening of the film early last year, and with her were several of her co-stars, including two intellectually disabled actors. The screening was sponsored by Special Olympics, and the following morning Williams spoke at an exclusive event at the National Association of Broadcasters hosted by Special Olympics and the Entertainment Industries Council (EIC), a nonprofit organization that facilitates the incorporation of accurate information about health and social issues into television, movies, and music. The event, part of EIC's "Picture This"

series, brought together about fifty experts in the field of intellectual disability to determine priority areas for onscreen depictions of the issue. EIC recently issued a report on the meeting and distribute it to thousands of writers, producers, directors and other entertainment creative professionals.

At the event, EIC President and CEO Brian Dyak told the people who work in the field to "leave your agendas outside this room...we are here to work with Hollywood, not to point the finger of blame at them."

Williams could not resist the urge to make her agenda clear: "I am here," she said, "to make it clear that it *is* doable." The "it" Williams refers to is the depiction of intellectually disabled people in entertainment, and especially employing intellectually disabled actors to play these roles, as was done in *My Brother*.

She said her role in the film "was an easy transition because I've been around [Special Olympics] athletes for many years, so when I started the work, meeting with [intellectually disabled child actor] Donovan Christopher during the rehearsal process and then working together, the only—well, as a child actor, you have a parent there anyway, so that was built in. And...dealing with him as an actor in a scene who plays [age] eight, the only difference was I was dealing with someone who's closer to six in terms of his attention span and energy. And it's just like telling a six year old, come on, focus, focus, and let's do it. It's no different. So "

"My agenda is to tell people about depicting intellectual disabilities, using actors who have intellectual disabilities: It's doable. And it's important to do it."

***On Her New Music, Wilhelmina Slater,
and Other Entertainment Matters***

Because some of Williams's songs are part of my life's soundtrack, I had to ask her about her music. She sings a hymn called "His Eyes on the Sparrow" in *My Brother*.

"I just signed with Concord Records so that I can actually lift it from the soundtrack for my next album, which when I heard that I thought it was a great idea."

Is she working on an album then?

"I'm getting the producers right now, talking to people, so hopefully we'll have something together and ready to go by the end of the year." She said she sings fairly regular dates throughout the country—Las Vegas, New York, and she'll be singing in Japan for a couple of weeks in May.

For a mother of four—her youngest daughter is a freshman at the Fashion Institute of Technology—or anyone for that matter—Williams remains busy, thanks in no small part to Wilhelmina Slater.

So Willy did somebody a favor after all?

"She makes no apologies for who she is," Williams laughed, clearly as in love with her character as the millions of *Ugly Betty* fans are. "And I don't think that she's particularly a bad person either. You know, there needs to be a villain, but I think that she wants what she thinks she rightfully deserves and she'll stop at nothing to get it." I noted that Wilhelmina's softer side has been shown in scenes with her daughter, Nico, played by actress Jowharah Jones.

"Right," she said, "which I don't know whether we're going to head back there because the writers... they tap into people, and I guess people like me to be mean. They don't want to see her..."

People don't want her to be likeable?

"I guess," Williams said and then, summoning Wilhelmina's all-too-familiar evil laugh she said, "Nobody's all mean—but it sure is fun to play her that way!"

For more Entertainment Matters and information about intellectual disabilities, go to www.eiconline.org.

Be a fan! Visit Special Olympics online at www.specialolympics.org.

