FUND FOR THE FUTURE

Tammy Tumbling knows what it’s like not to be born with a silver spoon. Now she wants to help others reach the brass ring.

BY LORI BASHEDA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEONARD ORTIZ
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Tammy Tumbling, COO of the Orange County Community Foundation in Newport Beach. Tumbling founded the African American Alliance Fund.
Tammy Tumbling knows what it feels like to be put down because of the color of her skin. She also knows what it feels like to be raised up. It’s why this past Juneteenth, she took $25,000 from her own bank account to launch the African American Alliance Fund.

“The cards were stacked against us as African American kids, but because of friends and allies, we were able to be successful,” says Tumbling, now 54 and executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Orange County Community Foundation in Newport Beach.

Tumbling was 17, living with her mom and four siblings in Compton, when she gave birth to a boy Sept. 2, 1983. Ten days later she started her senior year of high school.

Every weekday, Tumbling, who previously attended an all-girls Catholic school in Compton, caught a 5 a.m. public transit bus to La Habra High School, where no one knew she was a teen mom.

“My mom would walk with me and wait at the bus stop with me until my bus arrived. She was afraid for my safety and I was afraid for her to walk back home alone. We both needed to have courage for ourselves and each other every morning.”

Her journey to school took three hours. In La Mirada she had to get off the bus and catch another one. When that bus line ended, she walked the final two miles.

“My mom told me that although I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth, she could teach me how to grab the brass ring through education.”

Tragically, when Tumbling turned 19, her mom, her biggest champion, died of a massive stroke in the middle of the night. Tumbling, who was by now in her freshman year at Cal State Dominguez Hills, took legal guardianship of her three younger siblings.

With three jobs (Chief Auto Parts cashier, library assistant and teacher assistant) and four kids to care for, it took her six years to finish her business degree. During that time she also worked as a cheerleading adviser for her old Catholic school to cover her little sister’s tuition.

After graduation, Tumbling stayed at Dominguez Hills to earn a master’s in public administration.

Tumbling has since held executive positions at the Music Center of Los Angeles County, the United Way of Greater Los Angeles and Southern California Edison, where she oversaw the utility’s annual $20 million philanthropic giveaway.

Today, as the executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Orange County Community Foundation, she helps private philanthropists strategize how to share their wealth.

Now Tumbling has decided to become a philanthropist herself, using her own hard-earned money to create a new fund, which she hopes will serve as “a bridge from Orange County to the African American community.”

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**WHAT IS THE MISSION OF YOUR FUND?**
To raise awareness about systemic racism and support programs that advance African Americans within Orange County and surrounding communities.

**WHAT SORTS OF PROGRAMS?**
When I see social injustices, there are a lot of spokes to the wheel. From housing access to education to parental engagement … business development, health care. These are the issues that define systemic racism — and they must be addressed.

**ANY SPECIFIC SOLUTIONS?**
I’m thinking tutoring for high school students in the African American community. And safe passage. Sometimes they can’t get from school to home after hours because of the crime elements in their community. Also making sure high school seniors are matriculating to college and how do we help them stay there? And if more parents are informed about how to get their children into college, that adds value.

**WHY NOW?**
During a time of much social injustice in African American communities and with the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, I believe it’s time to go beyond what I’ve done in the past.

**HOW HAS YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE INFORMED THIS?**
I’ve personally experienced barriers because of the color of my skin, but also had allies who believed in me and gave me tools to advance professionally and personally. I recognized the importance of nonprofits that helped my family with advancing as local residents, students and professionals. We would not have been able to do that without friends and allies who held our hands and helped us along the way.

**HOW WILL THIS FUND HELP RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT SYSTEMIC RACISM?**
It creates an opportunity to have open dialogue and creates visibility for African Americans in the Orange County community (who account for less than 2% of the population and thus are nearly invisible, says Shelley Hoss, OCCF president and co-adviser on the fund).
CAN ANYONE HELP?
I want to encourage people from different backgrounds and socio-economic statuses to get involved and rally around racial injustice. This is an opportunity to be part of the solution. This is about humanity — and choosing to do the right thing — and that crosses color lines and breaks down barriers.

GAZING INTO YOUR CRYSTAL BALL...?
Being the first fund of its kind for OCCF, I envision more people getting involved to help tackle issues in the African American community with the hope that other funds will be established at OCCF down the road to address issues related to other diverse groups.

HAS THE FUND BEEN WELL RECEIVED SO FAR?
Yes! We are at over $40,000 in donations and commitments in just two weeks! It is so humbling to have such wonderful supporters of this important cause. So grateful!

— Tammy Tuining, COO of the Orange County Community Foundation in Newport Beach.

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Lori Basheda is a freelance writer in Long Beach.