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Executive profile: Amy DuBois Barnett, editor-in-chief of Ebony magazine

Amy DuBois Barnett is having an impact at the 66-year-old magazine, with print circulation and monthly website visits rising

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Amy DuBois Barnett is editor-in-chief of Ebony. (Antonio Perez, Chicago Tribune / February 23, 2012)

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By Erin Chan Ding, Special to the Tribune
March 19, 2012

Before Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball, before the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. marched on Washington and before Motown changed music, America had Ebony magazine.

In its pages, African-Americans saw intimate images of people who looked like them. They read about contentious issues that spoke to them. Circulation skyrocketed as Ebony became a crucial cultural voice.

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resonate with a new generation of readers while it sought to retain its most loyal subscribers. Rice invited her to lunch at the Custom House Tavern to discuss her thoughts and, six months later, welcomed Barnett to Chicago as Ebony's new editor-in-chief.

Within months after her name first appeared on Ebony's masthead, Barnett led the 66-year-old magazine's first cover-to-cover redesign, starting with the logo. Barnett tore the magazine apart and resculpted it, "basically dragging it by its ear into the 21st century," she said. Earlier this year, she rolled out a new Ebony website with dramatic photos and a category of the day's top stories called "Black Listed."

Her changes have made an impact. Unique monthly visitors to the Ebony website, according to Johnson Publishing, have doubled since the site's January redesign. Advertising Age hailed Ebony as the 13th fastest-growing magazine in the nation last year, citing a circulation jump from 1.1 million in the first half of 2010 to 1.23 million in the first half of 2011.

In the second half of last year, Ebony's circulation climbed to 1.26 million, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations. That figure is far from its zenith of 2 million in the mid-1990s, but it allows the magazine to hit its 1.25 million rate base, or guaranteed circulation number for advertisers, an accomplishment Rice called "a relief, let me tell you."

Rice's father, John H. Johnson, and mother, Eunice Johnson, started Ebony in November 1945; the company also publishes Jet magazine and owns Fashion Fair cosmetics. A few months after hiring Barnett, Rice also brought in longtime friend Desiree Rogers to be Johnson Publishing's chief executive.

Rice attributed the improved circulation numbers to Barnett's visual and textual changes, which she said strengthened the content of the magazine.

"What was important to me about Amy is that she brought more of a voice to Ebony," Rice said. "We had drifted a little bit. She built a strong perspective without losing the core of Ebony, which is about aspiration."

It's also about the black experience as a whole, and Barnett's own is anything but a placid one. Week to week, she can be found at the [White House](#) interviewing First Lady [Michelle Obama](#), dressed up at music mogul [Clive Davis](#)' pre-Grammy party, or simply enjoying the [Museum of Science and Industry](#) with her 5-year-old son, Max.

## Inspired by mother

It's with Max that Barnett began a recent Thursday morning. His full name is Max Robeson [Brown](#); just as Barnett's name pays tribute to civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois, Max's name includes a nod to artist, athlete and advocate Paul Robeson.

Nine hours after closing the April issue of Ebony — with [Whitney Houston](#)'s unexpected death prompting her to rip apart the magazine and, with the Ebony staff, accomplish in 12 days what normally takes two months — Barnett strokes Max's hair as he lays his head in her lap inside their three-story apartment in an industrial section of the West Loop.

But that was decades ago, before the Internet and more mainstream coverage of African-Americans ravaged circulation at Ebony, owned by Chicago-based Johnson Publishing Co. Something drastic needed to happen, and more than 700 miles away, magazine-industry veteran Amy DuBois Barnett thought she could help.

"It has always been a dream of mine to just touch the Ebony brand," said Barnett, 42. "I mean, it is the most iconic magazine for our community."

So two years ago, Barnett wrote Johnson Publishing Chairman Linda Johnson Rice an introductory email from New York brimming with ideas on ways to redesign Ebony and remake it into a brand that would



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"What does Mommy always say you are?" she asks him, starting a ritual she has had with him since he was born. "Nice. Smart. Strong."

He looks at her, repeating softly, "I'm a nice boy. I'm a smart boy. I can't remember the last one ... Strong? I'm a strong boy."

Barnett, who is separated from husband Jeffrey Brown, a sales and marketing professional, hugs Max and watches as he strolls out the door with his au pair, who will take him to a Spanish immersion program at the Intercultural Montessori Language School in the West Loop.

Barnett admits that her busy schedule means she hasn't seen her son a single night that week but says "I don't torture myself with guilt about that."

"I miss my Maxie so much," she says, "but I don't feel guilty because he knows how much I love him."

It helps, Barnett adds, that "I had a mom with a big job, who worked all the time, and I never felt the lack of her."

Barnett's mother, Marguerite **Ross** Barnett, was the first black woman to head a major research university when she was named the president of the **University of Houston** in 1990.

Marguerite Ross Barnett and Steve Barnett had their daughter in Hyde Park in 1969 while working on their doctorates at the **University of Chicago**, though Amy has spent most of her life on the East Coast.

Watching her mom thrive in positions of authority had a profound effect on Amy, said her father, now 70 and living in Brooklyn.

"The idea of her taking over something that has a great history but needed to be transformed — her mom did a lot of that, and it almost, amazingly enough, comes naturally for her," he said.

In 1992, Barnett's mother died of **cancer** at 49. Barnett often points to her mother's death as an event that jolted her out of complacency and into the pursuit of a life she loved.

## **Fashion and prose**

As big a connoisseur of the Gap and J. Crew as she is of Hermes and **Prada**, Barnett quit a job in finance to study fashion at Parsons The New School for Design in New York. After a year as an assistant buyer for Lord & Taylor and another year studying literature in Dublin, Barnett pursued a master's degree in creative writing from **Columbia University** in New York. Meanwhile, she combined an affinity for fashion and prose, taking on editing positions at FashionPlanet.com and Fashion Almanac Magazine and, after graduation, Essence magazine.

A dozen years ago, while working as a lifestyle editor at Essence, Barnett spotted Keith Clinkscales, the founder of Vanguard Media, in the lobby and snagged his email address, pitching him ideas about a lifestyle magazine that would speak to young, urban women. Months later, Clinkscales gave Barnett, then 30, her first top-of-the-masthead role as editor-in-chief of Honey magazine. In her three years there, she helped double Honey's circulation. Less than a year after Barnett left for Teen People, Vanguard filed for bankruptcy and Honey magazine folded, which she said "just broke my heart."

At Teen People, Barnett became the first black woman to lead a major mainstream consumer magazine. She credits her time at Teen People, which was part of Time Inc. until the magazine folded in 2006, with giving her the chance to redesign a website and learn best practices for running a media brand.

Five years later, after stints as the deputy editor-in-chief at Harper's Bazaar, as the author of an advice book called "Get Yours! How to Have Everything You Ever Dreamed of and



More" and as the president of her own development company called Polymath Media, Barnett flew from New York to Chicago to meet with Rice.

The Johnson Publishing chairman was taken at once not just with Barnett's industry experience but also with her buoyant energy.

"She's very curious and very exposed — not just stuck in one place," Rice said. "She's very multileveled and multilayered. She's fun and attractive and forward-dressing, and she brings that right down to the magazine. There's certainly an element of fun and vibrancy to her."

That fun comes in a wave of exultation on a recent day in Ebony's editorial offices when Terry Glover, the managing editor, offers her three Girl Scout Thin Mints — a welcome interruption to her ongoing attempt to avoid carbs.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" Barnett says, laughing.

The levity comes in contrast to the displeasure she had expressed 40 minutes earlier during an editorial meeting, when she learned a staff member had been spending time on a story idea that had not been approved.

"Not only are we working on a concept that wasn't greenlit, but it's past the deadline," Barnett said, her typically easygoing expression turning opaque. "This is irritating. Let's talk offline, because I do not have one more kind syllable."

In the seconds after she spoke, only a jackhammer on Wabash Avenue punctuated the silence.

"I very much respect the input of the people I work with, but at the same time, the vision for Ebony is mine," she said later that evening, while navigating her Infiniti FX35 through bursts of sleet and hail. "So what we're doing as a team is basically executing my vision with very intelligent, interesting, insightful input from my fabulous team, but at the end of the day, I have to make decisions based on where I think Ebony as a brand should go."

### **'Our magazine again'**

That direction seeks to honor the legacy of black Americans while luring young, urban, goal-oriented readers with bold visuals, revealing celebrity profiles, and heady political and social issues.

"We are very organically positioned to be able to talk to multiple generations," she said. "There's a unifying thread that runs through black culture that everybody can appreciate, old and young. I mean, there's something about black culture that transcends age."

Shortly after her arrival, Barnett altered the architecture of the magazine, creating distinct sections on politics, activism, fashion, business, health and wellness. She adjusted advertising placement so Ebony's longest stories could run without commercial interruption.

Still, Barnett has deemed that Ebony cleave to its past by culling from its own archives. Ebony's Tumblr site features a slew of cover pages and advertisements from decades-old issues of the magazine, while each day the Ebony website highlights a black history fact.

The attempt to bridge generations signals an admirable aspiration but also a formidable one, said Charles Whitaker, who spent 10 years at Ebony as staff writer and editor and is now a journalism professor at [Northwestern University](#).

"It's really commendable that it's their goal, but it's a really hard charge to pull off," Whitaker said, "You've got to figure out what that thing is that is the intersecting interest of these groups and make that the backbone supporting" the magazine.

"Ultimately," he said, "it comes down to the reporting and the stories: breaking news and finding something no one else has."

Kevin Powell, an author, activist and contributor to Ebony, points out high-profile thinkers,

including Ellis Cose, Toure, and Melissa Harris-Perry, who have written for Ebony in the past year. Since Barnett joined the masthead, Powell has written Ebony stories that dissected an attention-grabbing assertion that "black leadership is dead," called out current professional black athletes for a lack of connection to a world outside of money, sports and fame, and quoted actor Samuel L. Jackson in the March 2012 cover story saying, "I voted for Barack because he was black."

"Two generations after civil rights, Generation X and Generation Y, we weren't paying attention to the magazine. It was tired, it was corny and it was boring," Powell said. "She has made it our magazine again."

Barnett's workday does not end when she leaves the distinctive Johnson Publishing building in the South Loop. (At the end of June, its staff will relocate to the upper three floors at 200 S. Michigan.) Instead, on a Thursday evening last month, Barnett heads north on Lake Shore Drive and settles onto a stool at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management to talk to media management and MBA students.

She elicits sustained laughter when she talks of moving to Ireland in her 20s. "I studied writing and literature there because there's such a great history of writing and literature in Dublin, Ireland — slash — there was a boy."

Afterward, she sat down to dinner in Evanston, but not before calling her son to say good night, promising to wrap him up like a burrito when she got home.

When Barnett did step into her place just before 11 p.m., she later recalled, she entered Max's room, intending to give him a few loving squeezes before heading to her own space. Instead, the exhausted editor fell asleep beside her son, not waking until the morning.

Amy DuBois Barnett, editor-in-chief, Ebony magazine

**Age:** 42

**Raised in:** Chicago; Chennai, India; Princeton, N.J.; Washington, D.C.; Maryland; New York and St. Louis.

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in French and political science from Brown University; certificate in fashion merchandising from Parsons The New School for Design in New York and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Columbia University in New York.

**Most admires:** Her late mother, Marguerite Ross Barnett, and First Lady Michelle Obama

**Favorite interview:** [Halle Berry](#), because of their similarities in age, multicultural heritage (Barnett's father is white), being mothers to kids around the same age and because "it was a very personal conversation, just really real."

**Most challenging journalism experience:** "I once had a run-in with a rapper who threatened my life," Barnett said. While she was at Honey magazine, Barnett said, she interviewed a female hip-hop star who later approached her at a nightclub, screaming that she never said what was printed in the magazine. Barnett said she had the interview on tape to prove the quote was run verbatim and later resolved the issue with the head of the rapper's record label.

**Hallmark of a good leader:** "Somebody who hires people who are smarter than them at their various areas of responsibility."

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