



# Beautiful Family— Beautiful Minds

By Brian Egston  
Photo by Alex Jones

Outside the grasp of Atlanta's city limits in a small subdivision in Buford, an humble family remembers days in a basement where three children were kept for extended periods of time. Unlike cases of neglect and abuse, this is a tale of love, personal sacrifice and one with an astonishing payoff.

Kwesi Degraft-Hanson met his wife Latrisa while they were enrolled at the University of Georgia. The formally educated couple later had three children and instead of looking outward for the educational foundation for their children, they found answers in the basement.

Down a flight of rickety wooden steps, are the remains of a makeshift school complete with individual desks, maps, textbooks and various learning aids. The decision to homeschool their children was an important move as well as an effective one. While Hanson toiled away as a landscape architect, Latrisa was a homemaker and teacher to the children. The Hanson family now proudly boasts the achievements of their labor—all three children are attending Ivy League schools.

Aba, 20, who embodies a gentle and calm spirit, was valedictorian of her class at Buford High School. She is enrolled at Princeton University where she studies comparative literature with a minor in African-American studies and aspires to be a doctor.

Kojo, whose polished diction resonates through a deep baritone voice, is 19 and attends Cornell University. He's majoring in mechanical engineering and is a member of the track team.

And then there's the baby of the family, Araba, 17, who has the grace and spirit of an elder. She's starting her first year at the University of Pennsylvania and plans to double major in psychology and film studies.

Because her siblings all aspire to work in scientific fields, Araba's pursuit of acting could have been viewed by her parents as an act of rebellion.

"Whatever is in a person is their God-given gift to the world," says Kwesi, sitting in a chair with the posture of a proud chieftain. "I know some parents who tried to steer their kids into what they wanted them to be, and it doesn't work. If a person is passionate about theater, then that's the best thing for them to be in. I'm all for [Araba's acting]."

Kwesi and Latrisa admit they've always shared a desire to see Blacks do better. They also share a concern about the state of education in America. It's no secret that Georgia public schools rank among the lowest in the nation. The Hansons took matters into their own hands and into their home.

All three children were homeschooled until the eighth grade (with each attending a private Christian school for approximately two years) and the family spent non-school time socializing with other homeschooled families.

The Hansons might be considered a throwback family. They spent countless hours playing board games and simply having conversations. While Latrisa was preparing dinner, the children were reading or watching the news. The clan of five has never had cable television, and they paid off the mortgage on their very modest house years ago.

"Everyone in this country wants to live in a wonderful manicured subdivision," Latrisa says humbly. "And we had to make some decisions about how we were going to live. We decided that we would live within the means that we had at that time. Now, we have no debt."

All three children are familiar with popular hip-hop songs, but the girls are quick to mention that at social outings, when rap songs with explicit lyrics are played, they leave the dance floor in protest. They also have a large collection of Christian hip-hop. They download secular music for their personal collections, but the family preference is inspirational or socially conscious tunes.

Aba cites Tennessee Williams and Charles Dickens as two of her favorite authors. Araba gives a nod to *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut as two of her top reads. Kojo is a fan of Jack London's work and Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

Aba admits it was rough navigating the turbulent waters of the high school social scene, and Kojo says he wishes he had started playing football at a younger age. Aside from those minor matters, the children say they have no regrets about their childhood.

Unlike the oldest child, Kojo and Araba attended boarding schools after eighth grade. It was a difficult time for Latrisa. "I'm very, very close to the kids," she says. "I lost part of myself that first year when Kojo went away. That first day when we were getting ready to take him [to school] I wanted to do everything with him. I wanted to go shopping with him, I wanted to do anything that I could...because I was going to miss him so much." Even now Latrisa fights tears recalling the separation from long ago as Araba taps her mother's hand offering solace.

The parents' love is apparent as is the family kinship. They sit close to each other in the small living room displaying affection as though they haven't seen each other in years.

As the years passed and the children spread their wings, the dynamics of the family changed. When Aba, left for Princeton, Latrisa went back to school and earned a master's degree in non-profit organizational management. She now works as a manager at a bank. "My wife is doing very well career wise. When she stepped back up to the table, she didn't miss a beat," says Hanson.

And Hanson says the results of raising their children the way they did demonstrates three very important principles, "Limit TV watching and video games. That doesn't mean cut it. It means limit. Talk with your kids. Let them treat you like friends. And then discipline. Discipline is tough love." **g**

## The Hanson Family Formula for Success

1. Limit TV watching and video game playing
2. Spend time with children.
3. Discipline with tough love.