

# Bridge to success

Multicultural background  
motivates mother to give  
back to her community

By KARRIS GOLDEN  
Image Correspondent

**T**he need to find inner strength has driven Sonja Lee Bock since infancy. Today, Sonja attends the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, where she's earning a master's degree in sociology. But Sonja's current situation can't conceal that the journey thus far was often difficult, with many hard-won lessons along the way.

Adopted at 4 days old, Sonja grew up in Flandreau, S.D. It was a mixed community of whites and American Indians, and she was a product of both. She also counts African-American ancestry among her heritage.

Despite being surrounded by the communities of two of her cultural backgrounds, Sonja often felt like an outsider.

"I grew up in a segregated community — Indian and white," she recalls. "Indians had a different culture, dressed differently and were separate. I grew up thinking that was normal."

Sonja Bock counts white, American Indian and African-American in her ethnicity.

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“Normal” included identifying with one race, and Sonja often felt torn. Rarely did her black heritage come up; few in her community had seen blacks in person. Most often, it was assumed she was “just Indian.”

Sonja didn't hide her heritage, but she struggled when white classmates had difficulty understanding she was also African-American.

“I learned that my race didn't define me and that people would always try to define me by my race,” she explains. “I define me, and I can be a catalyst to define my race. Because of all the suffering I was spared and the privileges I had, I am obligated to give back and try to help others — to be the best role model I can for all children, not just my own.”

Despite struggling to shape her identity, Sonja knows what life could have been had she not been adopted.

“My reality is I could have been a child lost in the welfare system; I could have grown up alone and unsupported,” she notes. “I could have suffered so many horrible things. I was spared and want to do all I can to spare others.”

Sonja says she now has a great deal of empathy for others, especially children, because she understands what it means to overcome hardships.

“The one lesson that is certain in my life if you are put where you are supposed to be,” Sonja says. “After being reunited with my birth parents and knowing how my siblings suffered physical and sexual abuse, I knew I was blessed. Meeting my birth parents gave me everything I needed to complete my circle of understanding of myself — another reason to give back.”

After dropping out of college in 1985, she sought a way to define herself as a woman, too. She was on the brink of homelessness, living on peanut butter.

“It wasn't who I was or how I was raised,” Sonja recalls. “My parents who raised me, Dorothy and Clint Bock, gave me a good enough foundation so that I knew I didn't have to live that way.”

She married for a brief time and had twin daughters, Sarah and Cyndi, now 20.



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Sonja Bock surrounded by her daughters, twins Sarah and Cyndi, and younger sister Sundance.

At that time, she was the victim of domestic abuse, and she decided she didn't want her daughters to grow up believing that was simply “the way life was.”

“My daughters were my best and dearest blessing and my strength,” says the 42-year-old mother of three, including her youngest daughter, Sundance, 9.

Sonja worked for eight years as an insurance and sales expert. Part of her job was helping senior citizens and veterans

maximize their insurance policies.

“A light switch flipped, and I realized I really wanted to help people,” she says. “With the struggles I've had in my life, I began to realize the difference it would have made if someone had helped me.”

She also began to understand herself as an activist for all people, especially people of color.

“I want to empower women; you're helping all people when you help chil-

dren and women.”

Sonja moved to Fort Dodge, where she began to work as a community organizer and attended meetings for the Iowa Accountability Project. She finished college and became a counselor for kindergarten through eighth-grade children with behavioral and mental health problems. It was heartbreaking work Sonja nonetheless found incredibly rewarding.

Early on, she noted that children of color with behavior and mental problems were treated with civility, if not warmth.

“Kids are perceptive,” Sonja explains. “They notice when a teacher puts her hand on a white student’s shoulder but won’t touch the student of color. They see that — they see how they are treated differently.”

As a result, Sonja pointed these differences out to teachers to create better understanding. She also asked students what they wanted — what would help. She realized all children can learn, regardless of ability, if they’re specific needs are addressed and met.

It also requires family intervention

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### Sonja Bock

and support, not simply good teachers. “We have a crisis in America; it’s dangerous to send kids to school,” she says.

Her work with children fit well with helping the larger community. She wrote a plan to bring more professionals of color to the Fort Dodge area. She also organized wealth-building seminars for the city’s African-Americans, which taught everything from estate planning to maximizing 401k plans.

“My focus is to educate people. Racism is so subtle. People don’t understand the hidden costs of being African-American in our society. They

don’t understand how difficult it is for African-Americans to get a loan or pass an estate to leave to their children.”

It can begin with something as simple as investing an income tax return, she adds.

“The basis of everything is buying a home,” she says. “Change is going to be grassroots; we’ll take back our communities and take care of those communities.”

Sonja relocated in the Cedar Valley several months ago because one of her daughters transferred to UNI. She realized the area would also offer Sunny, a talented and gifted student, excellent schools.

Her master’s degree in sociology can take her in several directions. For example, she may consider law school. Whatever she decides, Sonja’s primary focus will be community activism.

“We’re worth fighting for. As someone from a multicultural background, I have a unique perspective. I grew up in a white, middle-class home, but I am a person of color. I can be a bridge, because I see both sides. I can help people understand other perspectives.” ♦



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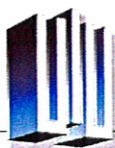
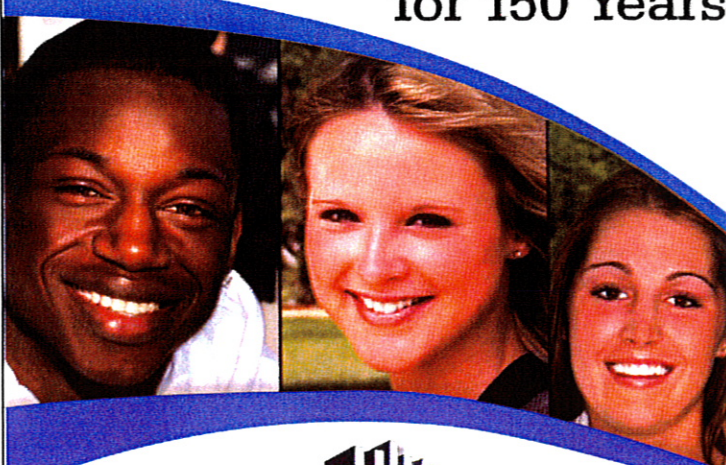
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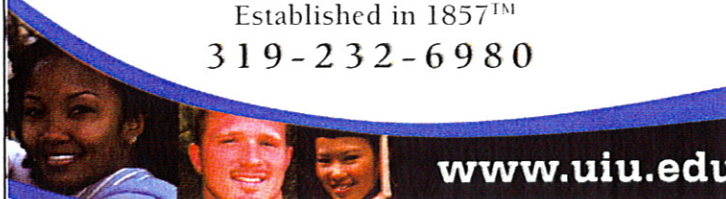
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