



Vonetta Flowers, *Heart of Gold*

AS BIRMINGHAM'S VONETTA FLOWERS crossed the finish line in victory at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games, she was not bashful about sharing the secret to her success. We heard her say it on national television during news conferences and interviews. She said it again at her Birmingham Homecoming Celebration. "My goal was to make the Summer Olympics. God had a different plan for me."

From a woman who describes herself as "reserved," Vonetta Flowers has a very powerful, succinct way of giving credit where credit is due. "God has blessed my family. I give Him the

glory and honor." Vonetta says her Gold Medal winning comments were not planned. The words came from her heart. "It just came natural. We (she and her husband Johnny) talk about God. It is just us. It is a part of our life... It wasn't me out there pushing that sled." Johnny Flowers adds, "It may not always be the 'in thing' to talk about God but we're not ashamed of it. He got us to this point. Vonetta is not strong enough to push that 450 pound sled and make it go that fast. Standing at the finish line I knew that it was the prayers of a lot of church members and other people praying for us that allowed the team to do what they did."

Where does this boldness for Christ come from? The Flowers say it began to develop during their college years as they competed as scholarship track athletes at UAB. Independently, and then as a couple, they saw their faith grow. At the invitation of a friend, Vonetta began attending church regularly. Johnny grew up the son of a Baptist minister. "I was in church about eight days a week," chuckles Johnny. "When I arrived at UAB I didn't want to go to church anymore. I wanted to do my own thing, but I got to a point where I realized I needed God to truly be successful and that's when I started to go to church for the right reasons." The couple began attending Faith Chapel Christian Center (see page 19)

and were married there in 1999. The Flowers say their shared faith is critical to the success of their relationship. "I think it would be very difficult to have a strong relationship without it. It gives you that total peace," says Johnny.

Peace is what Vonetta says gave her the edge she needed to become the first African American to win a gold medal in the Winter Games. "I definitely did not feel any pressure where as I had a lot of pressure on me when I was running in college." Vonetta says she drew upon the message she heard her pastor preach just before the competition. "Pastor Mike (Michael Moore) was teaching on the subject of faith or fear... I was living on faith not fear during the Olympics. I was able to relax, have a good time and focus on what I had to do."

For the first time in her long career of athletic competition, Vonetta says she was also blessed with no injuries. "I have had tons of injuries and many surgeries in track and field. I would get over one injury and get another. Competing in bobsledding was the first time I had been injury free in a long time."

Vonetta is also quick to tell you having the right coach definitely came in handy. When she was disappointed about not making the Summer Olympic Team in long jump, it was coach and

Scenes from 2002 Winter Olympics, Salt Lake City, Utah

February 19, 2002 Vonetta Flowers' childhood Olympic dream came true. While running track at Jonesboro Elementary School in Bessemer, 10 year old Vonetta set her sites on an Olympic Gold Medal.

As Birmingham's Vonetta Flowers and teammate Jill Bakken won the first-ever women's Olympic bobsled competition at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games, several members from Flowers' church were in the crowd to cheer them on to victory.



Courtesy U.S. Bobsled & Skeleton Federation

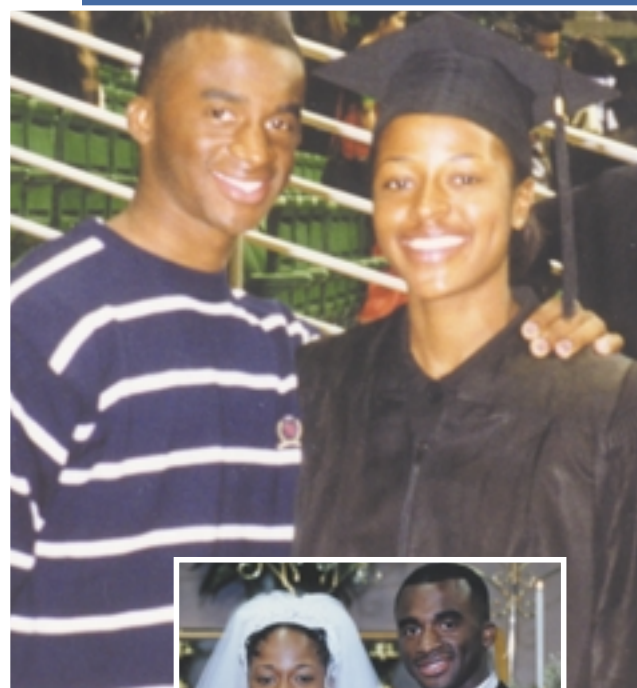
husband Johnny who urged her to try out for bobsled. "I knew she met the qualifications for a successful bobsledder— speed and power. She just lacked technique." When Vonetta was cut from the bobsled team just a few months before the Winter Games, it was Johnny that kept her on course. "I told Vonetta, God did not put you in this sport to now just two months before kick you out of it." Vonetta continued to train as though she was still on the team. Two weeks later she had not one, but two offers to return. Johnny watched his wife begin to see a much bigger picture. "As things started happening she began to realize maybe God does have me in this sport for a reason. Every time a door would close another door would open for her. I saw her develop this peace about it."

A peaceful demeanor is what Vonetta and Johnny Flowers continue to maintain despite their over night fame and a rush of requests for endorsements, appearances and speaking engagements. Vonetta laughs, "A lot of people think I came back from the games to sit on my couch. I'm still working as an assistant track coach at UAB just like I was before the games." Until the track sea-

son ends the middle of May, Vonetta and Johnny say they will wait to wade through the many opportunities they have for endorsements. However, one endorsement decision has already been made. "I am not going to change who I am for money." When asked if she's feeling any pressure from the spot light she grins and in her relaxed style replies, "I think it would be pressure if you are trying to be something you are not, but if you are being yourself it is not."

What does the future hold for Vonetta and Johnny Flowers? They both hope a large family. "I want to raise my children and experience being a full time mom," says Vonetta. Is another trip to the Olympics also on her mind? Vonetta says with a smile, "If God sees fit. I will be back."

— Laurie Stroud



(Above) Vonetta Flowers is the first graduate from UAB to win an Olympic Gold Medal.

(Right) Vonetta and Johnny Flowers met as freshman at UAB and were married in 1999 at Faith Chapel Christian Center in McDonald Chapel.



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