

# I've Come This Far by Faith

In the first of an exclusive two-part story, the popular Black female spiritual leader JUANITA BYNUM opens up to DENENE MILLNER during a series of interviews about the minister's five-year marriage to Bishop Thomas Weeks III, from its fairy-tale beginnings to its violent end. After a media baptism by fire in which her spirit and credibility have been put to the test, Prophetess Bynum tells us what happened August 21 when her husband allegedly assaulted her and how she's trying to move forward with a new ministry and message about domestic violence that may change the Black church, forever

**J**uanita Bynum's first house, the one she has spent the most time in, the one that she had called home until 2003, is in transition. She hasn't lived in the three-story residence in the New York suburb of Long Island for more than five years. Now she's back. In case you haven't heard, Juanita Bynum is divorcing her husband, Thomas W. Weeks III, pastor of Global Destiny Church, whom she wed in a lavish million dollar ceremony viewed by countless members of the faith community during repeat airings on Trinity Broadcasting Network. Weeks has been charged with aggravated assault after allegedly stomping and kicking Bynum in an Atlanta hotel parking lot around 10:30 p.m. on August 21. [He has pleaded not guilty to criminal charges stemming from the alleged attack on Bynum.] The last few months have taken a physical and emotional toll on Bynum. With the same determination that she's using to rebuild her house, the leading Black female televangelist is trying to pick up the pieces of her life. She knows that it isn't going to be easy, but she insists that faith will guide this "prayer warrior" through her greatest battle thus far,

one that has her fighting for her reputation and a multimedia empire—including recordings and books—she singlehandedly built more than a decade ago.

It wasn't this way when the two met more than five years ago through one of Bynum's assistants. At the time, "The Prophetess" had everything—she had found her voice and had thousands of devoted followers. The former beautician and flight attendant, who never had children, wasn't looking for love when she first met Bishop Thomas Weeks III, 40, a nondenominational charismatic preacher from Washington, D.C. He was part of a church dynasty. Apostle Thomas Weeks II, his father, moved in the same circles as Bishop Noel Jones and Bishop T.D. Jakes. Bynum spoke at several conferences Weeks III conducted. >



Bynum and Weeks at their wedding in happier times.

"I can't want someone who doesn't want me," says the Reverend Juanita Bynum, speaking of her estranged husband.

Juanita Bynum was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE, September 25, 2007, in Huntington Bay, New York.

MAKEUP: BILLY B/FACTORY DOWNTOWN; HAIR: LAWRENCE DAVIS/KARLEE ARTIST; MANICURIST: WYRDITH MCCORMACK/JUMP; MANAGEMENT: TALOR, PELLE/THE GROUND CREW

Photography by Matthew Jordan Smith Styling by Agnes Cammock

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**T**hough there was an eight-year age difference, there was much Bynum and Weeks had in common. They'd both been married before, and it was obvious the two were on a spiritual mission. In 2003 they launched a relationship ministry with his book *Teach Me How to Love You: The Beginnings*, which served as the centerpiece for their well-attended seminars.

On a warmer than usual fall morning, Bynum, 48, enters her comfortable, Victorian-influenced living room, where the blinds are drawn, blocking out the day's robust sunlight. Today she wears a plain white tee, a pair of gray sweatpants and no makeup. At first glance it's jarring to see this somber Juanita Bynum if you've experienced the fiery preacher who has witnessed and sung to enthusiastic, standing-room-only stadium crowds. Although Bynum went into seclusion immediately after the alleged attack, she has not been quiet, though few believe she's been truly forthcoming. Proclaiming herself the "new face of domestic violence," she made what could be described as a few misguided interviews on *The Tom Joyner Morning Show* and *Good Morning America* and in a front-page *New York Times* article, all of which did little to address the questions so many want answered: What happened in that parking lot on August 21? How could a woman who preaches female empowerment allow herself to remain in an allegedly abusive relationship? Is Juanita Bynum using this incident to further her own career? And then there's the urgent question that seems to fade further and further into the background as this story takes one knotty twist and turn after another: Why haven't more church leaders—with the notable exception of Bishop T.D. Jakes—spoken out against domestic violence? Bynum admits she's "overwhelmed." Today, however, she's fueled by a drive to protect her name and fend off disparaging comments from her husband. No, Bynum is not calling off the divorce. "I don't condone divorce or the breaking of two hearts," she says. "But I can't want someone who doesn't want me. To want me is to go through the necessary process, even if it takes ten years of counseling." And yes, she's heard everything her husband has said about her from the pulpit. Now she's battling back.

"All of what I'm going through right now has to do with the loss of my marriage, the love of my husband, and the jeopardizing of my integrity at the hands of my husband," says Bynum. "I don't want anyone to think that my silence meant consent. My silence was meant to wait for the cool of the day. This is not about anger or retaliation but integrity and truth on behalf of my name." Now, in her own words, she tells us her story:

### "I loved him. I really loved him."

*Many of Juanita Bynum's fans first came to know the energetic minister after she delivered "No More Sheets," her seminal 1998 sermon given at a T.D. Jakes singles conference. That candid message about how the Prophetess' promiscuity eventually led her to a newfound spirituality was released as a video that same year and attracted millions of viewers; many held No More Sheets parties. Bynum, who had ended her first*

*marriage in 1985, married Weeks in 2002. Many of her supporters were relieved that she had at last found happiness with a man who seemed to be a kindred spirit, a man who had swept her off her feet after two dates. This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But I'm doing this [interview] because I have a responsibility to the truth. When I was assaulted in the parking lot [of the Renaissance Hotel on August 21], it crossed the line. For three months I have been slandered on Sunday mornings from the pulpit with false statements about my character. Now, I don't condone chasing every lie, but in this case, I feel [a] responsibility to speak the truth.*

I love my husband. I don't know anybody who wanted their marriage to work more than I wanted mine to work. And I never wanted to be divorced. About six or seven months into the marriage, I began to have my own untold hurt. I voiced it to him, but I don't think he was hearing me. One of my husband's main complaints was that I would not give him a schedule. He wanted to plan vacations, but I was afraid because every time we would try to go away and have a good time, it ended up in a fight or an argument. To me, it was safe for him to take me to dinner and for us to be around people.

I don't want anybody to think I was stupid for staying; I stayed because of who I was—I had to be careful. My thoughts were, *I can't get a divorce. What would people say? How would they view me?* I just felt like I needed to pray more. And I did, and it did get better. We went three years without him getting physical, but then the verbal rage would still be there.

### "I was determined to keep my spirit right."

*In 2006, Weeks started GlobalDestiny Ministries church, which claims to have branches in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and London. He and Bynum bought a reportedly \$4.5 million home in Duluth, Georgia, the Atlanta suburb where Weeks's church is based.*

I put down a \$300,000 deposit on [the house], and to bring his credit to the level where the interest rate wouldn't be so high, he agreed to get the contract for a two-year lease [with an option to buy]. He was supposed to pay the rent—\$18,000 a month. It didn't bother me because I love my husband and we were a team. In March, he wanted me to start looking at condos in Buckhead. I didn't want to leave our house because I had a prayer room in that house that was very sacred to me. I came back from a trip and was getting ready to tape for television when he walked in and said he had already moved us out and all of our furniture was in the church warehouse. I cried for two days. My sisters said, "Nita, you'll get another house," and I said, "It's not about the house." This was the place where I had the presence of God. That's the one thing I had. And I felt like that's what [my husband] took. I was determined to keep my spirit right. I said okay. All of our furniture was in the back of the church. I made the most of it. But we had been going through a lot and I guess at this point, I was full. And the reason I left is because he began to scream at me in the hallway of the church. Most people would have thought that I would have left for a bigger reason than that, but I was wounded because he was screaming about how I left [a] cover off an air conditioner. I had lost my house. I was living in the church. I had the air on 60 degrees

for three days because I was hot. I broke down crying. I said, "I can't even have air?" On that day they were having a repast at the church, and he screamed at me so loud that everybody who was at the repast stopped, and one of the deacons had to come in and say, "Bishop, they can hear you." And at that point, I said, *It's time to go*, and I packed up and I left. The church had a birthday party for him, after he had said months before that God said don't have the party. I didn't come. He became angry because I didn't show up to save face, [so he could] just prop me up like a trophy and say, "Well, my wife is here."

### "When I get through with you, nobody will respect you anymore."

*Bynum and Weeks had been separated since mid-May. For most of the summer, she kept busy with her ministry. In early August, Bynum says Weeks showed up unexpectedly and sat onstage at a mentoring conference in Orlando, Florida, that she was hosting. Bynum says she briefly spoke with him because they needed to take care of unfinished church business. Thereafter they communicated mainly through text messages. In mid-August, Bynum visited her husband, in part, to discuss a conference she wanted to hold at GlobalDestiny.*

That conversation didn't turn out well. As I was leaving the office, we had words in the hallway and I was just broken up and in tears. And that's when he pulled me into my office, and he began to ask me what was it that really hurt me. And I told him it was all the things that he got up and said about me. He apologized to me and asked me out to dinner. And that night, I stayed with him.

That morning when I got up, our conversation went immediately back into church stuff—new church building, new Web site, business as usual. And I felt like because everything was so fragile, could we just talk about us? On Tuesday [August 21] we were supposed to meet for lunch, but I sent him a text telling him that I didn't sleep well the night before, and that we could meet for dinner anytime after 6 p.m. When he didn't reply, I e-mailed him again. He texted me back, saying that the church [for use of her conference] was scheduled, but he was going to see what he could work out. And then he wrote, "...what about the tithes from May until now?" When I had received the tithes in May, I donated them to a mission group in Dallas. He was expecting that to go to his church. I said that I recognized tithes as a holy thing, and that the people I gave them to were Godly and righteous people. I also said that at this point, I don't think we should resurrect anything old. He sent me a message that said, "I'm en route to the hotel right now; meet me in the restaurant at 9:40." I told him that I wasn't in any shape to be in public. He sent back another text saying, "Get dressed and be in the restaurant at 9:45," with ten exclamation points behind it. I told him I didn't want to fight—that I felt like I was losing it. I sent him a message saying, "If you're mad, I can't see you; I can't take it." He texted back, "This is the last time I'm going to say 9:45!!!" At this point, I was really crying, and I sent back a message saying, "Are you taking me anywhere? Because I don't want to be in the lobby. I don't want to cause a scene." And then his text came back: "The second floor restaurant." At that point, I asked my friends Crystal and Tina, who were

"Nothing warrants what I received in that parking lot. Nothing," says Bynum.



sitting in the room with me, if they could get a room in the hotel and not leave me. I had the feeling that something might happen. They promised to be close and went to a Waffle House nearby.

At the restaurant he began to express things he was angry about, one of them being about the tithes. He said he did not believe me, and that's when he got angry and I got up first and began to walk away, and he said something to me like, "You're always walking out." So I came back and sat down and said, "Has loving me always been about the money? Have you ever just ▸

"I don't know anybody who wanted their marriage

to work more than I wanted mine to work."

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seen me for me?" And the conversation took a drastic turn. It wasn't loud, but it was very intense. And then he said, "When I get through with you, nobody will respect you anymore," and walked away. I ran out to ask him why he had to go that far—what did I do for him to want to destroy my name? I asked him, "Does that mean our marriage is over?" We exchanged a few words, and I said, "I just want you to be my husband. I don't want Bishop Weeks, I just want my husband." And he said, "Then come home." And that's when I broke down and I said, "What house?" I ran away from him and said, "You



**Faith, Fame and the Fall Out:** (Top center and above) Bynum moves crowds with her voice; (top right) site of the couple's joint ministry; Bynum's *No More Sheets* is a favorite; (left and bottom center) Bishop Thomas Weeks III, Bynum's estranged husband, has been charged with felony assault for allegedly attacking his wife.

**"I had lost my house. I was living in the church. I broke down crying."**

took my house. You could have taken everything else from me, but not my house." When I looked up, I was near his truck. He turned around and said, "You didn't come to my birthday party." And then I said, "But you said God said don't have a birthday [party]."

And then he just grabbed me, and he grabbed me around my throat and threw me to the ground. I said, "Oh, my God, my head!" because the whole sky was spinning. And when I turned around, that's when I got the first kick. I screamed out, "Please don't kill me!" That's when the bellman grabbed him, and they were going at it. I don't know what was happening, but the bellman was going into his pocket, and I grabbed his arm and got between them and said, "Please don't hurt my husband," and that's when the bellman let him go. And I took maybe two or three steps over and I collapsed on the ground. I picked up the cell phone and called my

friends, and I was screaming and saying, "[Thomas] just really beat me up." They came to get me, and by the time they pulled into the parking lot, the security people had come over, and both of my friends tried to conceal me and drove me to the Delta parking lot.

They were asking me what did he do? And I was telling them my insides were on fire. I was shaking; I couldn't stand.

When we left the parking lot, I was still begging my friends not to take me to the hospital. But by the time we got to the hotel room, I couldn't breathe well. They said, "We gotta take you." So they covered my face up and took me through a different side door at the hospital. We tried to do everything anonymously—to sneak in without anybody knowing who I was. When the doctor was finished with me, I was asked if I was going to press charges. I said no. When I got up to put my clothes on, the doctor came back in and said, "With the kind of bruises that I'm seeing on you, I would lose my license if I did not call the police. I'm sorry, I can't let you leave." And that's when I really started crying, because I did not want it to go public. [In a September 14 press conference at Global Destiny, Weeks said he did not condone violence against women and said, "I have walked away from many situations between the two of us, just like I walked away that night," according to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.] [CONTINUED ON PAGE 276]

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### **"He completely lost it."**

*After news of the alleged attack broke, Bynum, who was granted a restraining order against her husband, disappeared from the public eye for nearly two weeks. She says that she suffered multiple bruises, some of which still remain. She alleges that her husband stomped her so hard in her back that her lungs became inflamed, which has led to symptoms of pneumonia. In early September, Bynum announced that she forgave her husband, but she was filing for divorce and ending their five-year marriage. Weeks concurred that their union was "irretrievably broken" and continues to deny that domestic violence occurred in their marriage. As we went to press, Bynum's divorce petition had not been granted. According to the Atlanta-Journal Constitution, Weeks requested that any debt be split equitably, but not in half.*

Abuse comes in different forms. One incident that stands out is one time when we were coming back from Virginia. It started with tension; there wasn't any yelling or anything like that. We had walked on the beach and I wanted us to talk because I knew there were problems we just needed to talk about. We went to Outback, and I said to him, "Can we just talk? We have things that we need to talk about and all couples talk without fighting. Can we just lay [the] issue on the table and just talk?" And he got really irritated. And then he and I didn't talk anymore until we got into the van. On the highway, I said, "What is it that you don't want to talk about?" And he just blew up. He completely lost it and started beating the steering wheel and yelling at me.

## "It takes two people to break down a marriage."

He pulled off on the side of the road to a gas station, and there were a lot of people out there, and he pulled the van up and told me to get out. He went in the back of the van and threw my Louis Vuitton luggage out in front of the people. I was sitting in the car and looked back to see what he was doing. When he started throwing my luggage out, I said, "Wait!" He was snatching the other door open to get the rest of my luggage out and the door knocked me to the ground. And he left me there. He had my purse, my phone, my money. I had nothing. I felt like trash. About 45 minutes later, he pulled up at the gas station, put my stuff back in the truck and pointed his finger and told me I better not open my mouth again until we get home. And he pulled off down the highway. The next exit, he saw a Motel 6. He threw all my luggage out in front of the Motel 6 and didn't come back and get me until the next night.

### **"I'm not a victim, I'm a survivor."**

*In mid-October, Bynum's \$4.5 million South Georgia compound was scheduled to be auctioned off for nonpayment of property taxes. Bynum remains steadfast that she is moving on with her life and that "this too shall pass."*

What happened to me in that parking lot is something that my husband will have to live with in the presence of God. If they gave him 2,000 years, it wouldn't even begin to match the pain, the embarrassment, the physical hurt and the emotional hurt that I've experienced. There is no punishment they can give him that will fit what I'm going through and will continue to go through.

We're both responsible for this marriage not working. He didn't want to put demands on me because he promised the world he wouldn't. I didn't put demands on him because I told him that I

wanted to make it a goal of mine that he reach his goal. And so we were both so busy doing that for our careers that we just overlooked doing it for each other. And so even though domestic violence is a part of why our marriage is ending, it's not the sum total.

If I'm really being fair, I can't point fingers and say he did this and that, because it takes two people to break down a marriage, even if one person does something over the top. When you roll back, you'll begin to find missing links and offenses that were never dealt with and conversations that were swept under the rug, even when they should have been discussed and ironed out and worked through. Now, nothing warrants what I received in that parking lot. Nothing. But by the same token, that incident wasn't all that was wrong with our marriage.

People will say, "If you love your husband and you forgive him, why can't you just reconcile and go to counseling?" And I wish with all my heart that it could be as simple as that. I have faith that God is a miracle worker, because I've seen him work miracles. But I'm not sure, not 150 percent sure that the person I saw in the parking lot that night won't ever show up again. I still have multiple bruises on my legs, my back, my neck. The one on my back caused pneumonia—I'm still taking medication for it. I had to go back to the hospital a week after the incident because I couldn't breathe. I couldn't walk from the couch to the bathroom—I was completely out of breath. I had to sleep sitting up on the couch, propped up, because I couldn't lie flat and catch my breath.

When I came to TBN two weeks later, I had all kinds of girdles and stuff on to hold my back together, and I was in a lot of pain during that program, but I felt that it was necessary for people worldwide to know that I was okay, and for people to know that I was going to survive it. Bruises heal, but the real hurt? It'll probably take me a lifetime to heal.

I can't emotionally die in it. An idle mind is the devil's workshop. Sometimes idleness can bring on the spirit of victimization. I'm not a victim. I'm a survivor. It's almost like if you're a teenager and you get pregnant, you're going to have the baby out of wedlock whether you want to admit that you're in that group or not. You're in the group—you've been grouped. And I think my experience grouped me. My part of it all is not so much right now for me to teach women anything but to allow my life to be exposed to this.

I think you teach people more by what you do than what you say. And I think that whoever is going through whatever, not just domestic violence, I think they will be encouraged to keep pushing because they see me pushing. You know, it's like I look at other people and I get encouraged to keep pushing because they keep pushing. I think if I don't ever get a chance to stand up and give one message about domestic violence, I think women or men see me keep going. It speaks volumes for where I've been.

When people can see where you came from and see what you are today and know looking at where you came from and know that there is no real legal reason why you should even be left standing and you're still standing, that is when God gets the glory. That's when people say there must be a God somewhere. That's where my stand is right now. □

**Denene Millner is an ESSENCE contributing writer.**



Go to [ESSENCE.COM](http://ESSENCE.COM) for more with Juanita Bynum. And be sure to pick up the January 2008 issue of *ESSENCE* for part two of our interview.