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Gardner-Webb Alumna Producing Film to Destigmatize Mental Health Issues

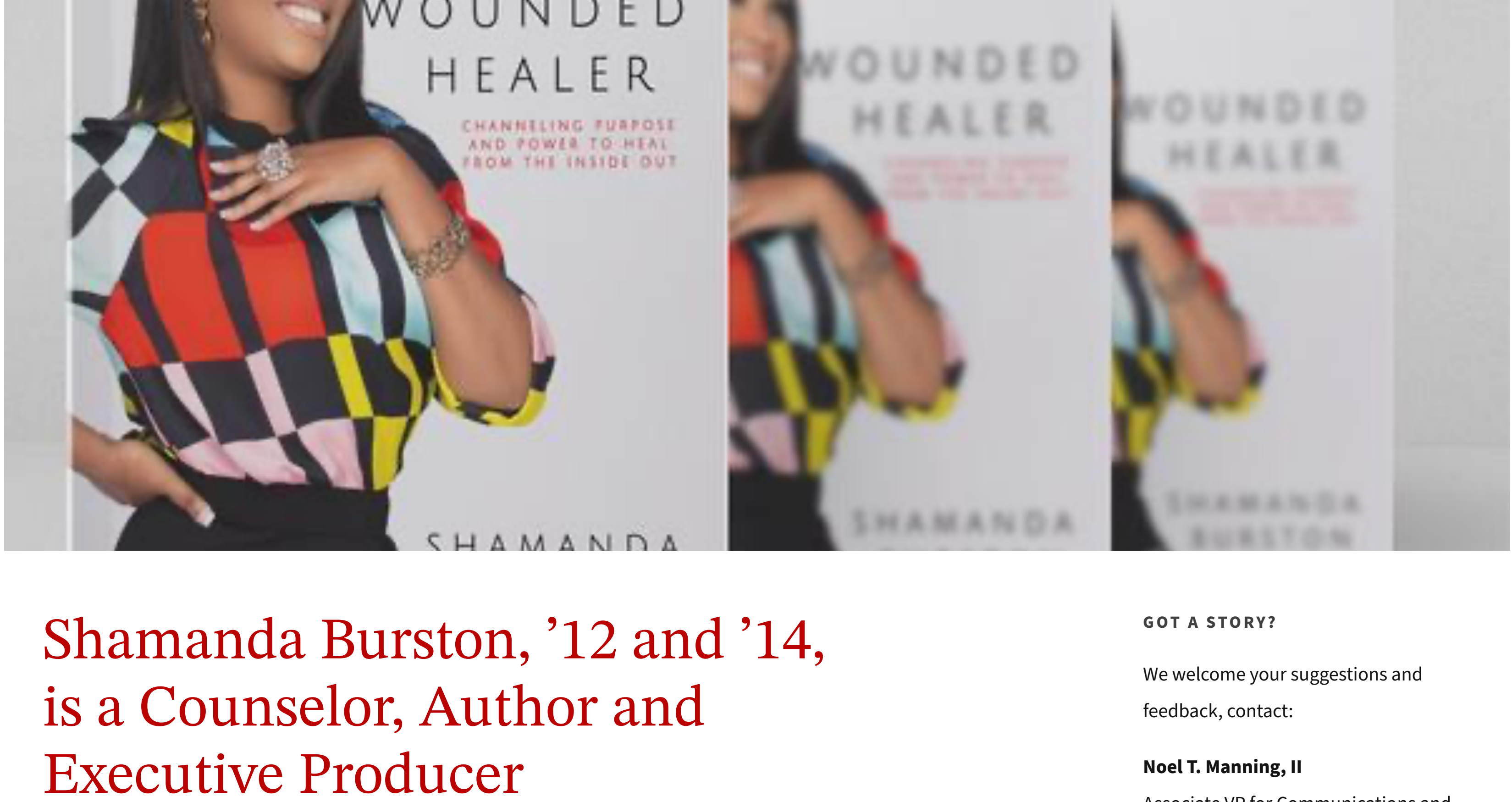
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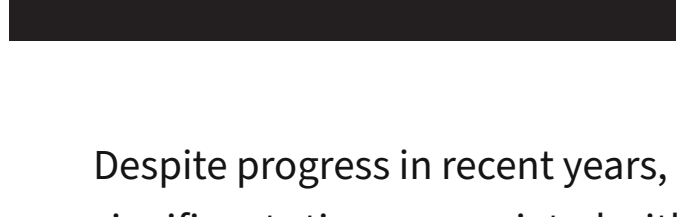
BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Gardner-Webb Alumna Producing Film to Destigmatize Mental Health Issues

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON JANUARY 29, 2021



Shamanda Burston, '12 and '14, is a Counselor, Author and Executive Producer



To our readers: In celebration of Black History Month during February, Gardner-Webb University will introduce you to alumni who are making a difference in the world around them. Through their jobs and creative passions, these alumni are inspiring others to achieve their dreams.

Despite progress in recent years, mental health professionals acknowledge that there is still a significant stigma associated with mental health concerns. Shamanda Burston, a Gardner-Webb University alumna and mental health counselor, is on a mission to destigmatize mental illness by introducing and integrating mental health topics into the world of television and film.

Burston describes herself as a “wounded healer”—a person who has endured and survived her own pain and is now able to assist others in healing. In June 2019, she published an autobiographical book with that title. This year, she’s producing a film, also called “Wounded Healer,” that is adapted from the book and inspired by her own journey to wellness.

“I’m beyond excited about this film, as it has allowed me to utilize the education I acquired at Gardner-Webb as a mental health counseling major; my over a decade of direct care experience in treating behavioral health/addictions, and my passion for filmmaking,” Burston shared. “I have an opportunity to spread mental health awareness, educate other cultures on the Black experience, and promote/encourage counseling for people of color across the world.”



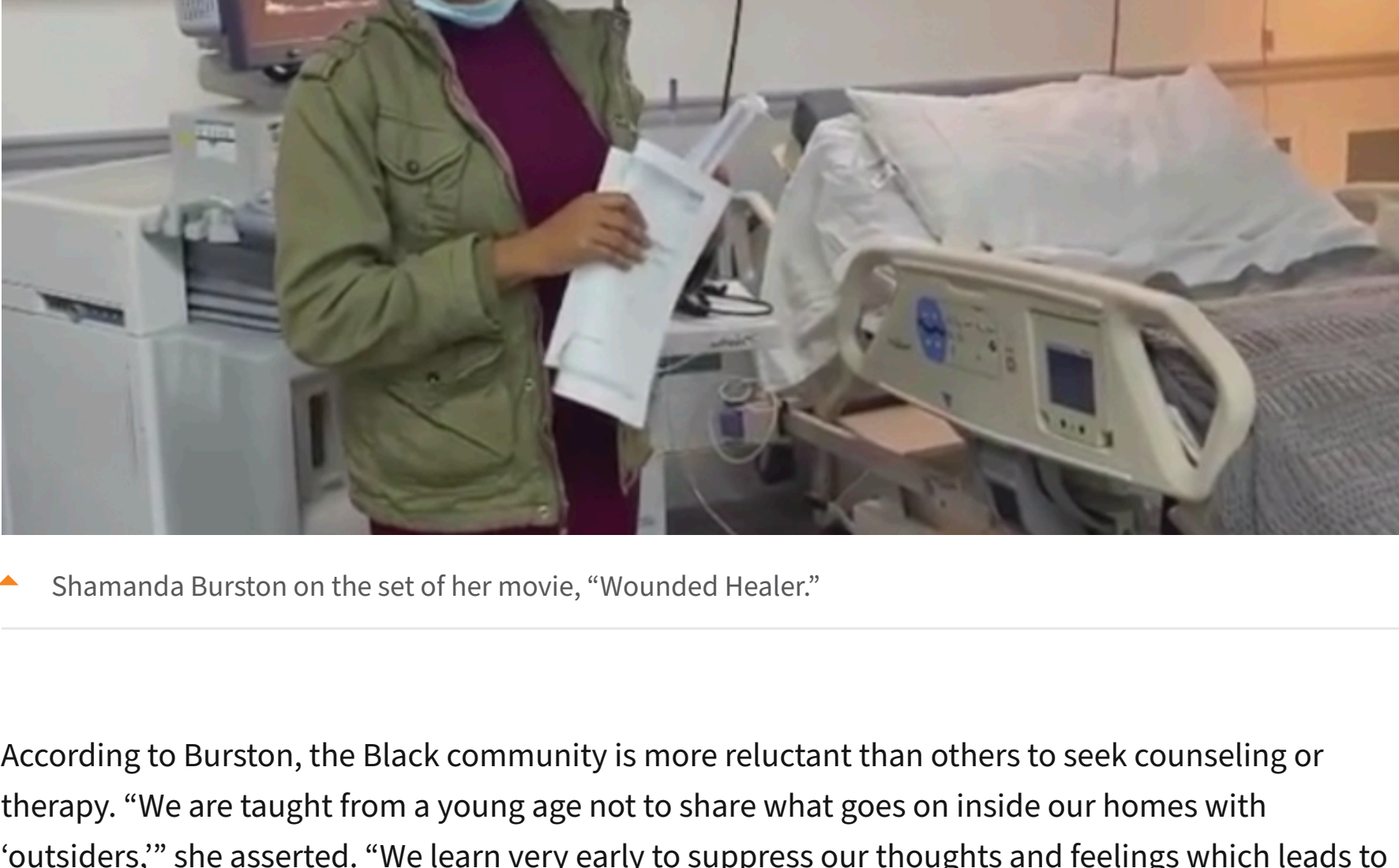
Burston, who lives in Atlanta, Ga., graduated from GWU in 2012 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in human services. She obtained her Master of Arts/Education Specialist degree in mental health counseling in 2014. As a first generation college student and single mom, she appreciated the encouragement she received from Gardner-Webb’s faculty.

“I valued the openness and understanding of my professors,” she related. “I have to thank Dr. Willie Fleming, a person of color, who encouraged me to pursue the field of counseling. I am truly grateful to Dr. James Morgan for serving as a reference during my internships and creating an opportunity for me to be a published researcher during my graduate program. Dr. Sharon Webb gave wonderful supervision and direction.”

Also at Gardner-Webb, Burston learned how to overcome her fear of public speaking by creating and presenting research presentations for class and at national conferences. “Although I struggle with anxiety, I know that I wouldn’t have reached my current level of success without the practice, feedback and encouragement provided during my classes at GWU,” Burston stated.

During a crowdfunding campaign in July 2020, she raised \$21,000 in cash and services to produce her film. The project has been followed by multiple television networks for distribution in 2021. Production was January 22-27 in Atlanta, Ga.

“This book-to-film adaptation follows the life of a resilient Black woman who happens to be a therapist,” Burston described. “She has worked for many years to help her patients address their issues but never addressed her own personal traumas. It was important to produce this film, especially at this time, due to the various societal challenges affecting the Black community.”



Shamanda Burston on the set of her movie, “Wounded Healer.”

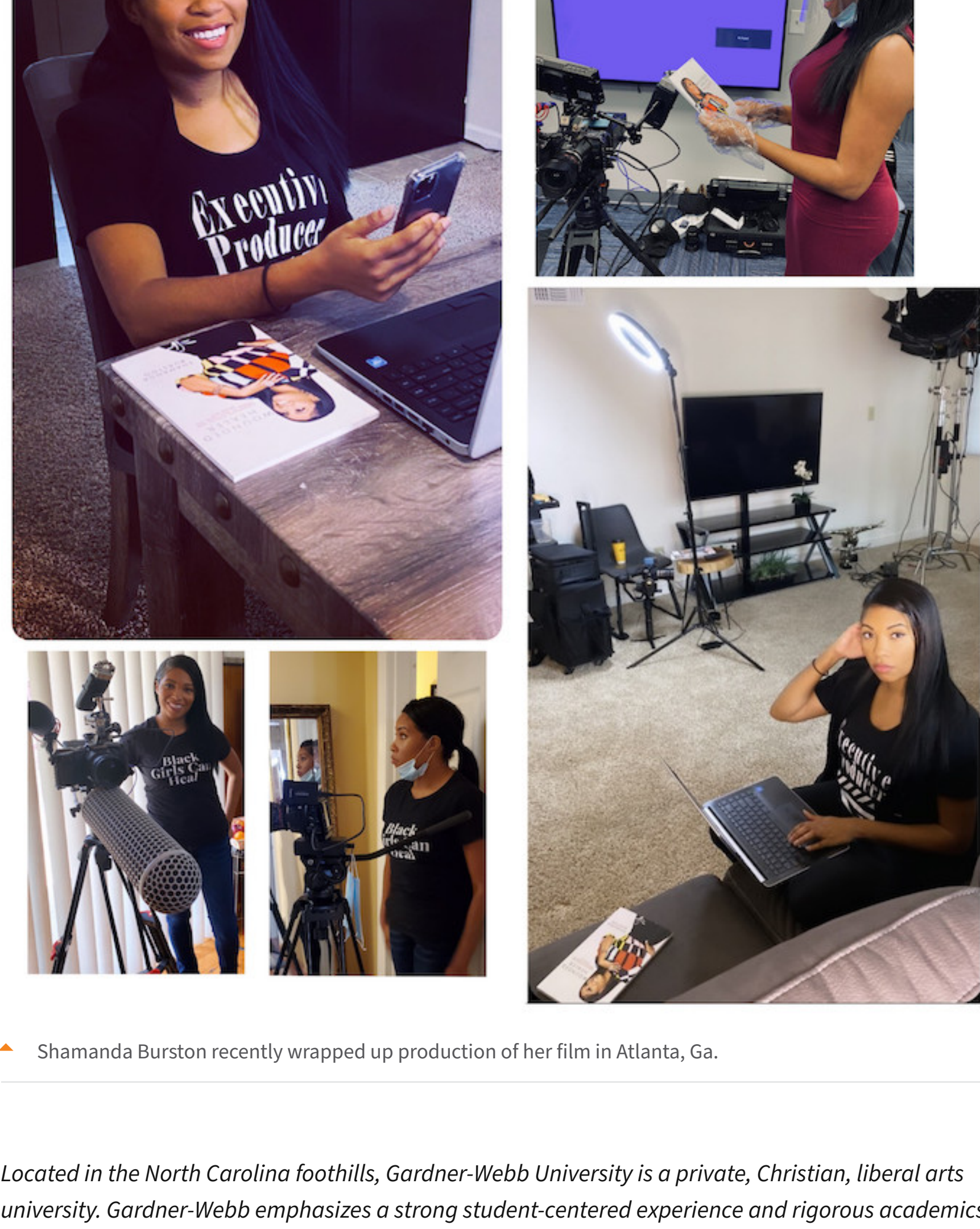
According to Burston, the Black community is more reluctant than others to seek counseling or therapy. “We are taught from a young age not to share what goes on inside our homes with ‘outsiders,’” she asserted. “We learn very early to suppress our thoughts and feelings which leads to multiple issues—mental, physical and psychological. As a Black community, we’ve experienced extreme traumas that are passed down from generation to generation.”

The main character in her film lives with an autoimmune disease, which has triggers related to stress and anxiety. “The film also highlights the importance and effectiveness of family therapy,” Burston offered. “Family therapy allows all voices to be heard. It provides an opportunity for transparency and vulnerability and of course, healing.”

Burston’s book and film can help families begin the conversation. She offers more tips to help families discuss mental illness:

- Accept the fact that dysfunctional family systems are common.
- Be willing to learn about the mental illnesses within the family in an accepting and loving manner.
- Recognize that the healing journey cannot be forced. Just because one family member is ready, doesn’t mean the entire family will be ready or accepting of counseling or mental illness.
- It’s important to learn the “family roles” and which role we play within our family system. One person may be the “Family Hero”, “Black Sheep”, “Scapegoat”, “Enabler”, etc.
- Recognize that most mental illnesses are genetic. This can help alleviate the “blame game”.
- Identify motivation to finally address the family issues: To break generational curses and stop the cycles.
- Engage in individual therapy to identify and process personal triggers, traumas and areas for growth.

For more information about Burston, shamandaburston.com.



Shamanda Burston recently wrapped up production of her film in Atlanta, Ga.

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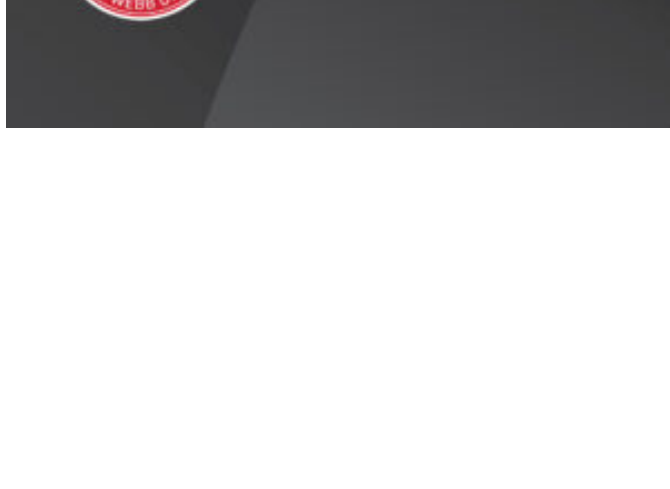
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