



Pulley-Pruitt cuts up with daughters India (left) and Nika.

BERNADETTE PULLEY-PRUITT

A Maryland mother feels the emotional tug of her past

Kneeling beside a tombstone in an old graveyard near Annapolis, Md., Bernadette Pulley-Pruitt rubs chalk across the timeworn letters until the inscription emerges: "Timothy Harris. Born March 31, 1834. Died March 1905. With the upright man thou shalt show thyself upright." Her eyes glisten as she reads the tribute to her great-great-grandfather, who was born a slave and died a free man. "It's really unexplainable," says Pulley-Pruitt, 42. "I feel like I'm on sacred ground."

Her companion at graveside, Orlando Ridout IV, understands. The cemetery is filled with his ancestors, who first came here in the 1600s and carved out a vast farm. In fact, Ridout's forebears once owned Timothy Harris, the only ex-slave buried in their family plot. Ridout, 76, views their intertwined histories with equanimity. "That's just rural life here in Maryland," he says.

Pulley-Pruitt (who, ironically, now works for Ridout's son Orlando Ridout V as an administrative assistant at the Maryland Historic Trust) first looked into her family's shrouded past 10 years ago, after hearing a lecture by *Roots* author Alex Haley. She started spending Saturdays at the Maryland State Archives, poring over birth and marriage records and death certificates. "I was always trying to figure out who I was and where I came from," says Pulley-Pruitt, who lost her mother, Amelia Estella Harris, when she was 16 months old and was raised by the extended Harris family. "I never knew my mother," she says, "and I know that a lot of my ancestors never knew theirs."

Pruitt-Pulley first discussed genealogy with Ridout when he would call his son's office and she would answer the phone. Then, a year or so ago, she mentioned that her mother was a Harris. He seemed surprised and said there was a Timothy Harris buried with his relatives. At home that night she found Timothy's name in her records and called Ridout to tell him. "I wanted him

to know there was a very close connection," she says.

Today, on a perfect fall afternoon, Pruitt-Pulley and Ridout wander through that cemetery where their ancestors lie. They pause before a soaring marble cross erected to the memory of Samuel Ridout, a physician and minister who officiated at the funeral of Timothy Harris's son Frank, on Aug. 20, 1871.

"I heard that all the slaves got remarried after the Civil War," says Pulley-Pruitt. "I think Reverend Ridout might have remarried Timothy and his wife, Mary."

"I feel I should express gratitude to all my ancestors," says Pulley-Pruitt (at the Maryland grave of her great-great-grandfather Timothy Harris).

"Really?" says Ridout with delight. "That would be something, wouldn't it?"

It is clear that Pulley-Pruitt and Ridout, who first walked this ground together six weeks ago, are fond of each other. But the centuries-old legacy of slavery may have created a certain reticence, even between people of good will. Pulley-Pruitt admits that she and Ridout have not yet sat down and discussed the relationship between the two families. "Some things take time," she says. "There is a season for everything."

For now she is happy to have found her great-great-grandfather and to feel tangibly reconnected to family and history. "My ancestors were survivors, and I see myself as a survivor," says Pulley-Pruitt. "I admire their consistency, their unwillingness to give up." It is a persistence she has clearly inherited. ●

Written by: William Plummer

Reported by: Karen Grigsby Bates in Colorado Springs, Gabrielle Cosgriff in Houston and Rochelle Jones in Annapolis

