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**By FELICIA C. HANEY**

Staff Reporter

You may take the girl out of the community, but you can’t take the “Community” out of the girl. Cliché? Maybe.

But, there’s nothing more genuine than the heart-warming, infectious smile worn by

Cleveland-bred actress Yvette Nicole Brown.

Her smile has graced the big and little screens alike for close to 15 years now. Undoubtedly thankful for her multitude of blessings – which include her current role as Shirley Bennett, a single mother and vocal Christian going to school to jumpstart her brownie business in the hit NBC sitcom “Community” – Brown began from humble beginnings.

“I’m an East Cleveland girl, proudly,” Brown said with conviction. “We’re a scrappy group of people and we overcome. We love our city.”

Fortunately for her, she’s not the only one. Brown shares some Cleveland camaraderie with “Community” executive producers and
Benedictine High School
graduates Anthony and Joe Russo who’ve been known to coax her into doing extra takes by pleading “Do it for
Cleveland
.”

Though working on the “Community” set brings about long hours, Brown speaks volumes on how much fun she has with her fellow cast of eclectic “misfits.” “‘Community’ is set in a community college and it’s like a bunch of misfits,” Brown said. “All different ages, all different races, both genders. It’s essentially about a study group of misfits and how we get along with each other and clash with each other. Chevy Chase is one of the students, Joel McHale from ‘The Soup’ and Ken Jeong who’s the Asian guy from the ‘Hangover.’”

Chase, who she admitted to initially being intimidated by, made Brown feel comfortable right away and serves as the veteran storyteller on set. “He’s a very funny man,” Brown said. “And he knows everyone from Paul McCartney to Richard Pryor. He came up in the beginning of ‘Saturday Night Live’ so he knows everybody. You never know who he’s met, talked to, or had dinner with and he brings all those wonderful stories to the set and shares them with us.”

But Brown’s body of work is no small tale to be left untold. She entered the entertainment industry as a teen after she politely stalked ex-New Edition member turned mogul Michael Bivins in an Akron hotel lobby. Brown admitted to following Bivins around like an annoying little

sister, buzzing in his ear, begging for the chance to let her sing for him. When Bivins finally gave in, Brown sang and left Bivins with not only her phone number but also a lasting impression.

Before she knew it, she signed with Bivins’ East Coast Family and toured the globe. So naturally, after graduating from the University of Akron, she headed to Hollywood setting out to sing.

“I came to be a singer and singing didn’t pan out for me. So, I thought… ‘Let me just try to act,’” she said. “Around 2000 or 2001, I did a gospel play with David Talbert and I toured for about a year. The cast included Malik Yoba, Stephanie Mills, good, good cast. When we came back, I was like… ‘I so want to do this!’ I remember when I just wanted to do one commercial and one sitcom and I’m already so far beyond anything my little East Cleveland-born mind could dream of. It’s the gravy and icing on the cake stage now.”

Well, one commercial turned into dozens. She’s done everything from Pine Sol to Yoplait yogurt to the voice of “Mrs. Lewis from downstairs” in the Nike spots that featured puppet versions of herself, Kobe Bryant and LeBron James – one of her most revered roles if you ask her.

“I grew up loving the Muppets and that was a dream I never even vocalized because I mean, who really gets to be a Muppet, you know? When I auditioned to be Mrs. Lewis, I never even thought she would be seen. Then, they were like, ‘oh no, we’re gonna do a puppet for her.’ I was like, ‘Oh Lord!’ I was so excited. I even have a picture of Mrs. Lewis on my website. I’m so proud that I was a puppet.”

It’s her puppet co-star and fellow Northeast Ohio native LeBron that she was a little less than proud of. Although the dagger’s been removed for a year and some change now, Brown said “It hurt a little bit” but she never suffered any real wounds as a
Cleveland
fan.

“I feel like you leave quietly and you stay loudly. I don’t regret him following his dreams. Everybody needs to live their life. I don’t think it means that he doesn’t love Cleveland. He’s just a young guy. Sometimes, we make mistakes but you never know unless you go for it. I’m someone who had to leave

Cleveland
to follow my dreams. I couldn’t have the life that I have as an actor from here. Do I still come back? Every chance I get. Do I still talk about
Cleveland
? Every chance I get. I make sure people know that I’m from here and I’m proud to be from here, but sometimes your dreams take you somewhere else. I believe that fences can be mended and eventually
Cleveland
will embrace him as a hometown hero again. I just wish that he didn’t leave so loudly.”

Well, one boisterous mention she can be proud of is NBC picking “Community” up for a third season. The season premiere airs at 8 p.m. this Thursday, Sept. 22 where you can see Brown’s character Shirley, the self-proclaimed “Mother Hen” of the misfit bunch in action.