



Studying Strong Black Marriages Changed My Own

A thousand pages of interviews changed one PhD student's marriage. Now he documents Black couples who draw on faith to build strong families.

By [Antonius Skipper](#)

FAMILY MATTERS

January 30, 2026

This article is part of a four-part series that draws from insights in our forthcoming book, Exemplary, Strong Black Marriages & Families (Routledge, in press).

My journey as a researcher of strong African American families of faith begins with a short story about my paternal grandmother. As a highly religious, praise-dancing, Bible-quoting woman of faith, my grandmother based her every thought and decision on a religious foundation. After being diagnosed with colon cancer, she faithfully tucked her prescriptions into her Bible in lieu of having the prescriptions filled. If she was here today, my grandmother would argue that she won that battle against cancer. She would emphasize that she was faithful to the end, and she trusted that God would have healed

her, if it was His will for her to be healed on this Earth. However, for a 16-year-old kid who just wanted his grandmother, her death left me with more questions than answers. Unbeknownst to me at the time, her death would plant in me a seed to understand religion and its role in Black families.

I entered the halls of Louisiana State University as a new PhD student in July of 2013. I knew that I wanted to research religion, and I knew that there was a professor by the name of Loren Marks who entertained my initial desire to examine the role of religion in the lives of African Americans who had experienced a stroke or heart attack. He supported my attempts at a pilot study on the topic, which turned out to be a methodological nightmare and a “failure.” However, I believe that life had something more for me all along.

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One day, while sitting in Loren’s office during our weekly Monday meetings, and while expressing my frustration with my dissertation proposal, he revealed that he had something for me. Handing me a massive 4-inch binder with over 1,000 pages of narrative interview data, Loren asked me if I would like to read the interviews of the married, strong Black couples that **he had researched** for over a decade. I read all 1,000 pages of interviews over a single weekend. I was fascinated! The stories of these marriages were so rich, so detailed, and so *sacred*. I was amazed that it could even be considered “research.” The role of religion in building a strong marriage was central to each interview, and this further ignited my desire to understand religion in Black families. The Monday after I had been handed a binder too big to fit in my bookbag, I asked Loren if I could utilize the interviews on strong Black families to examine how religious coping had contributed to their strong marriages. He enthusiastically agreed. We have now been research partners for 13 years.

Despite my desire to study strong Black marriages, I was not necessarily surrounded by these types of relationships growing up. Neither of my grandmothers were in long-term marriages. In addition, my parents divorced around the time I graduated from high school. My parents had separated long before their divorce, so most of my memories of “family” came from looking at old pictures and seeing us all smiling together. Growing up, the best example I had of a strong marriage was a set of my great-grandparents, who were married for about 60 years before the death of my great grandfather, Paw-Paw.

Paw-Paw was a minister in Southern Louisiana. He was deeply **grounded in his faith**, and he raised my highly-religious, praise-dancing, Bible-quoting grandmother that I mentioned earlier. I never thought much about my great-grandparents' marriage, nor did I have a real opportunity to understand it because I only observed it as a child. However, I do know that they shared many similarities with the married, strong Black couples I have interviewed for my research. They saw their marriage as a sacred bond. As the grandchildren of slaves who were legally unable to marry, they were determined to honor their marital vows and build a family on faith and religious beliefs. I wish that I had been able to witness more of my great-grandparents' marriage, but I am also thankful because I recognize the privilege of having a strong Black marriage in my family's history.

Rarely seeing a strong Black marriage as a young adult did little to stop me from jumping into marriage at a relatively young age. I married my amazing wife, Tasha, 20 years ago. To be honest, before being introduced to the 1,000 pages of data from married, strong Black families, we had experienced our own hurdles and done our best to navigate them as a couple. But something happened when I traveled to study at LSU. Was it that distance made our hearts grow fonder as my wife stayed behind in Georgia for my first year of graduate school? Perhaps it was because after my wife moved to be with me at LSU, we had to figure married life out on our own because our parents were no longer nearby. Or perhaps it was the interviews and my realization that strong Black marriages existed and could be *amazing*. Whatever the reason, I am certain that my time with those sacred interviews did more for my marriage than it will ever do for my career.

The stories of these marriages were so rich.

When I ask Black couples who have been married for up to 60 years how they have done it, I am documenting their experiences for the many Black people who, like me, have rarely (or never) witnessed a strong Black marriage. I am documenting their experiences for the many Black couples who, like my wife Tasha and me, are still figuring out how to grow closer together each day. I am documenting their experiences for the many Black communities around the world that, like mine, are burdened by external stressors (such as financial strain, racism, and incarceration) that constantly threaten the stability of the Black family. Every moment, every interaction, and every opportunity has carried a purpose that has brought me exactly where I am, doing exactly what I am called to do at this moment, which is studying strong Black families and loving the journey.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that my conversations with Dr. Loren Marks and a weekend with 1,000 pages of narrative data would change my life. Yet, they have. Each time I speak about my research, Black communities and families share with me that there is a need—an unquenchable thirst—for stories of Black couples deeply **grounded in faith** and unwaveringly dedicated to marriage. I have been a witness and recorder of profoundly sacred family moments where husbands have poured out their hearts to their wives and wives have found comfort in the arms of their husbands. I have been invited to vow renewals, wedding anniversaries, and family dinners. A few months ago, I received word from a husband I had interviewed that his wife had recently died. He thought enough of our interview to let me know the news. For me, that was deeply powerful, and as I revisited their interview, I thanked God for allowing me to share in such a sacred experience.

I have no idea where this work will take me. What I do know, however, is that I have stopped trying to figure out where it will take me. This is no longer just research, so there is no longer a need for an agenda. What was once the tall task of a dissertation has been simplified to Colossians 3:23: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord” (NIV). Through my work, I know I will continue to share the stories of strong Black families, and those stories will bless those who hear them.

They saw their marriage as a sacred bond.

I am indebted to *Public Square Magazine*, as they will be running three additional articles during Black History Month to highlight our team’s work with Black families. I urge you to stay tuned as you hear directly from the voices of strong Black families this month. These articles will focus on: (1) serving others, (2) using faith to cope with racism, and (3) the power of positive humor. As you engage these stories, I invite you not simply to read them, but to receive them. Allow the lived faith of these families to speak to you, to teach you, and to bless you and those around you. These stories are not ours to own, only to share. They are reminders that Black love grounded in faith can be profoundly powerful—capable of overcoming even the highest hurdles attempting to impede familial stability. May their faith strengthen yours, and may we continue to go forward as one people, as brothers and sisters, just as civil rights leader John Lewis urged us to do.

About the author

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Dr. Antonius Skipper, dubbed the “strong Black marriages guy,” is an Assistant Professor at Georgia State University. He is a collaborator on the American Families of Faith Project, where his research broadly examines faith within exemplary Black marriages and families.