

Seretha and George Tinsley work tirelessly to nourish both the body and the spirit

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Two nourishment comes in many ways. And while it's vitally important to nourish our bodies daily, a Winter Haven couple has made a personal commitment to both their families and their community to help foster an understanding and awareness of the importance of nourishing the heart and soul each and every day.

Seretha and George Tinsley are generally loud smiling and laughing. It's true they face the same daily pressures we all do in raising a family and maintaining family security through their business. But, like the KFC chicken they sell, they seem to understand "the secret recipe" for successfully giving to a community.

The Tinsleys, who were high school sweethearts in Louisville, Ky., have two grown children — daughter Penni, a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who is pursuing a modeling and acting career — having recently appeared on "Good Morning America" and "The Today Show" as well as appearances on such soap operas, "All My Children" and "The Guiding Light," and son George Tinsley Jr., affectionately known as G2, who is a graduate of Morehouse College and who is currently pursuing a career in airport concessions at Miami International Airport as the family company continues to grow its business interests. In fact, the company's business is named for the Tinsley children — PenGeo, Inc.

Despite the family's professional demands, those close to the family over the years saw first hand that both Penni and George Jr. understood early on from their parents the importance of education, hard work and discipline. "If only everyone could have Seretha and George Tinsley raise their children," said longtime Winter Haven friend Donna Jackson. "They know what they are doing."

The Tinsleys, who have been in Polk County for more than two decades, are probably best known as highly successful restaurant business owners of PenGeo, Inc., the top-grossing Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in the Tampa Bay area, according to ZoomInfo, YUM and the Tampa International Airport's TGI Friday's Restaurant.

Many may not realize the Tinsleys are involved in 45 restaurant operations including KFCs, CGI, including a new KFC in Kissimmee, Jose Cuervo, Quinzos and Home Team Sports Bar and Grill, according to an article in the Power Broker Magazine that ranks PenGeo, Inc. as third in a list of the top 10 black-owned businesses in the Tampa Bay area.

But in addition to their business projects, the couple also lends their volunteer support to many civic and non-profit programs and organizations. It's the Tinsleys' positive attitude about how they approach life that transcends daily business.

"I met them years ago and found them to be good people who believe in giving to the community," said William Alexander, incoming president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Winter Haven. "They support everything." Alexander isn't overstating that fact.

Literally, the list is lengthy of the many organizations and programs assisted by the Tinsleys including the NAACP Youth Council, Winter Haven Bankers Club Banquet, various Martin Luther King Jr. Day activities, various Black History Month activities, a youth leadership program co-chaired by PenGeo, Inc., Polk Community College, the Girls and Boys Clubs, prison workshops, the United Way, Catholic Charities outreach programs, Youth Basketball of America (George Tinsley was a coach for many years), the Free Enterprise Day program and Teen Summit.

In addition, George Tinsley has served on many boards in the community including: the United Way, Polk Education Foundation, Polk Community College Foundation, Ridge-Vo-Tech advisory council, First Union Bank, Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce, Auburndale City Restoration committee, PCC Speakers Bureau and Amateur Athletic Union's KFC basketball team.

"We've never seen anyone work so hard," said Faye Bellamy, a community leader who works with Seretha Tinsley serving 100-150 children, ages kindergarten-12th grade, who are involved in the Chain of Lakes Achievers organization in Winter Haven.

Seretha Tinsley, who does not enjoy "the limelight," but would rather work behind the scenes, quietly, is a co-founder of the organization and her focus within COLA involves its tutoring program and leadership training center. "She works circles around anyone else around her. Both the Tinsleys have provided resources and volunteer hours to support this program for the benefit of many children."

"Seretha has done a variety of things within the organization, including providing programs to teach about entrepreneurship and professional etiquette," said Bellamy. "Whenever she sees a need, Seretha is there to support. I often tease her, because she watches the television show, 'Touched by an Angel,' (starring Della Reese and Roma Downey) that I think she works so hard to be that angel for others."

"They have become surrogate parents at work to countless youth who have worked at their KFC business over the years," said Perry Burnham of Winter Haven, who, at one time worked as a general manager for the Tinsley's KFC store in Auburndale. "They're teachers as well as employers. They really emphasize integrity, ethics and teach the importance of working as responsibly while teaching technical aspects of being a business person."

"When you see the young workers at KFC blossom into responsible adults, you know that Seretha and George Tinsley had something to do with it," said Burnham.



The Seretha and George Tinsley family includes daughter Penni and George Jr., who is affectionately known as G2.

"The backbone of our business is the young people we hire," said George Tinsley was quoted in an article about the couple featured in BlackEnterprise.com. "Many KFC team member relationships are established through community activities and we consider it a privilege to be able to mentor these future leaders and to help them achieve their dreams."

George Tinsley Sr. was one such dreamer as a child. He had been abandoned as a baby and was raised by an elderly babysitter who encouraged his athletic talents. A star basketball athlete at Louisville's Male High School, George Tinsley Sr. attended Kentucky Wesleyan College in 1966 and was a key part of three Division II NCAA national championship teams as well as earning an alternate spot on the 1968 U.S. Olympic basketball team. Seretha Tinsley enjoyed all these successes as she was also a collegiate at Kentucky Wesleyan where the couple were named 1969 Homecoming Queen and King and she was a cheerleader.

The Tinsleys married in Louisville and George Tinsley was later drafted to the old American Basketball League to play for teams in Washington, D.C., Miami, Kentucky and New York. He would teach at his alma mater, coach basketball and track there and became a training instructor for Kentucky Fried Chicken, even working with Colonel Harland Sanders, himself during a three-year program.

"I got the burning desire to be a franchisee early as a trainer," said George Tinsley Sr. "I was working with franchisees, helping them learn how to better run their businesses while all the time I saw them taking money to the bank. I knew I could do it." The couple opened their Auburndale KFC in 1984 and haven't slowed down since.

Another of George Tinsley's talents was working well with people. "Some people come out of school with master degrees in finance and are great making numbers work, but they don't know how to handle people," Tinsley often says to potential KFC franchisees. "Your employees and your customers may arrive in a bad mood, but you have to motivate them and make them glad they spent money in your restaurant. You have to make sure they go away happy with a great experience. That's a skill that you don't always learn in a book."

"Success can be earned through hard work and dedication," said George Tinsley. "Don't be a prisoner of your own mind. If I can do it, you can too." In fact, the Tinsleys are currently working "on developing Starbucks on the Street in non-traditional settings. We are also very interested in our continued growth with KFC and YUM as well as TGI Friday's Development on the Street," said George Tinsley Sr.

Those in the community haven't let the Tinsley get away with their good works without being honored. Community awards over the years both individually and collectively have included the City of Winter Haven's Community Service Proclamation, Winter Haven NAACP President's Award, Omega Phi Phi Citizen of the Year, Kappa Alpha Phi Fraternity Citizen of the Year, Haines City Dr. MLK Community Service Award, National Coalition of Black Women Sponsorship Award, City of Winter Haven Human Relations Committee Community Service Award and Heartland Private Industry Participation Award.

"Our focus is, and always has been, to give back in the particular communities we live and do business in," said George Tinsley Sr. "We love working with the children who are our future."