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HOLLYWOOD WEEKLY



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POWER COUPLE

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MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY

Richmond, Virginia's Ultimate Power Couple Exemplifies the Power of Love

By E. Ce Miller

When Jacquelyn E. Stone was a young girl, growing up in then-segregated Williamsburg, Virginia, her mother shared the biography of an African American shopkeeper from Williamsburg who was so wealthy he loaned money to then-president of The College of William & Mary—a school that did not allow people of color to enroll until 1951. Growing up just steps away from the college, even as a child Stone was struck by the fact that a Black man was wealthy enough to grant a loan to the leader of William & Mary, yet would have been barred from attending as a student.

It's a story that must have stuck with her.

The Stone family valued education and taught their children to do the same. Jacquelyn, the only sister to her three brothers, remembers staring longingly out the window of her family's home as a child, watching her older brother catch the bus to school. Stone was so eager to attend school herself that her mother set up a child's-sized table in the family room of their home—Stone's "school"—and let her pretend she was attending as well.

When Jackie was finally old enough to enroll in school, her parents sent her to the private Walsingham Academy. It was the early 1960s and there were not many educational options for African American children—nor were there many other students of color at Walsingham. Stone spent her afternoons and school breaks surrounded by the children of color who lived on her street, and her school days immersed in a white student body. The dichotomy this presented for Stone left echoes that reverberated through her life years, even decades, later. This dichotomy taught her the power of diversity.

Stone's roots in Williamsburg run deep and read like a pedigree of mid-Atlantic royalty. Her maternal grandfather worked at an elite golf course and met stars like Perry Como and others.

Her father, the Honorable William T. Stone, was the first Black lawyer in Williamsburg, the first Black judge in Virginia, and founded the first integrated law firm in the state. Judge Stone mentored Jackie and many other rising attorneys. He was mentored by Oliver Hill, Sr. one of the pioneering lawyers that won the Brown v. Board case that ultimately allowed students like Jackie to attend any public institution.

So perhaps it is no wonder the Harvard Law School-educated daughter of Williamsburg grew up to become the first African American female partner at a major law firm in the state of Virginia, the first African American on the Board of Partners for the law firm of McGuireWoods, and the firm's first African American hiring partner—a role she held for over two decades. Those early experiences at Walsingham must have left their mark as well: Stone both created and chaired McGuireWoods' Diversity and Inclusion Committee for most of her career, making such an impact that the firm's Diversity and Inclusion Award is now called the Jacquelyn E. Stone Diversity and Inclusion Award. Most recently, Stone was named Best Mentor: Law Firm by *The American Lawyer* Industry Awards. This makes her the top law firm mentor in the nation.

And that's just her day job.

When she's not trailblazing in the legal profession, serving as Executive Vice President & Chief Legal Officer to film investment company Soulidify Productions is a labor of love for Stone. Literally. In 2017 Soulidify Productions was founded by Stone's husband, former Verizon Communications executive, and current PGA film producer BK Fulton. Soulidify produced or co-produced four feature-length films in its first year—a feat no other independent production company can claim to date.

In his first act, Fulton was the first Black president of Verizon Virginia and first Black vice president of Verizon's Mid-Atlantic



BK and Jackie at Home overlooking the financial district in downtown Richmond, VA.

Region. From the moment he "retired" Fulton's second act was in full swing. As of this writing, Fulton and the Soulidify team are on set with Bruce Willis, Leon Robinson and Frank Grillo working on their tenth film in four years—eight are currently in the marketplace (including the much-celebrated *River Runs Red* featuring Taye Diggs, Jon Cusack, Luke Hemsworth and George Lopez; *Love Dot Com: The Social Experiment*; and the award-winning *1 Angry Black Man*). The ninth film, *Freedom's Path*, is expected to release by summer 2021.

He is also the author of eight children's books—Shauna—about growing up with a disabled sibling; the seven book series *Mr. Business: The Adventures of Little BK*, based on Fulton's own childhood; and one award-winning nonfiction title for young adults—*The Tale of the Tee*, which is a book about the power of simple acts to heal. BK is putting the finishing touches on a middle-school reader and Book 8 in his *Mr. Business* series along with a cartoon in collaboration with Lion Forge Animation, who won an Oscar in 2020 for their *Hair Love* cartoon short. Finally, BK has written and plans to release two novels about love, faith, and the power of knowing one's roots. All of BK's books are on Amazon and audible.com.

To call Stone and Fulton a "Renaissance" couple just barely scratches the surface.

What they're really doing is building an empire.

As the benefactors of Virginia Tech's *B. Keith Fulton and Jacquelyn E. Stone STEAM Endowed Scholarship* and recent donors of over a million dollars in art to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), it's fitting that Stone and Fulton first met at a local charity event in Richmond. They briefly locked eyes across the room of a leadership meeting for the United Negro College Fund, hosted by the current chairman of the VMFA. At the end of their initial meeting, Stone—who, if you ask Fulton, is



BK&J with Henry Lewis Gates, Jr. and Russell Wilson in RVA.



the kind of person who has never met a stranger—introduced herself. The next meeting was on a chilly winter evening the following month. When they shook hands, he noticed hers were cold. He warmed them between his own.

The rest is history.

They were married on January 1, 2014—New Year’s Day, seven days after Christmas, six days before Stone’s birthday, and nine days before Fulton’s. It also happened to be the 151st anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation: a happy coincidence for the couple who has dedicated so much of their dynamic careers to diversity, inclusion, and equality.

Their ceremony was deliberately small, but well attended—their seventy guests included the first Black governor of Virginia and a former majority leader of the US House of Representatives. They held it just around the corner from where Jackie grew up, at the Williamsburg Inn—a once-segregated venue that neither Stone nor Fulton would have been allowed inside of when they were growing up in Virginia, in the 1960s.

It’s a centuries old, storied institution; one that Margaret Thatcher and Queen Elizabeth frequented when they were in the States. Fulton and Stone stayed in the Queen’s suite on the night before their wedding. They were married in front of the iconic spiral staircase leading into the East Lounge, where the Queen entertained when she was in the US. Judge Stone was the officiant. It was a moment that inarguably changed the history of a place the couple would have been barred from just decades before. It was an unforgettable affair, the significance of which was visible on the faces of everyone who witnessed it, from Fulton and Stone’s guests to the event staff who were present that day—the couple’s delight in one another palpable. But, like the very best love stories, their romance hasn’t always been all fairytale.



In the summer of 2017, Stone suffered two brain aneurysms. One of them had ruptured. Stone also was diagnosed with an arteriovenous malformation (AVM) and underwent a level 10 of 10 multi-hour brain surgery—a procedure with a disconcertingly low survival rate given the combination of Stone’s challenges. Of those who survive the intense procedure of removing the AVM and fixing the aneurysms, a significant percentage (almost 80%) return from surgery with severe disabilities. Stone’s doctors expected she had only a 1% chance of returning to her career as a high functioning lawyer. She was told to prepare for up to eight months of recovery and rehab. Together, the couple leapt into the unknown. BK moved into the hospital to be by his wife’s side. Their love and faith kept them steady.

Two weeks following open brain surgery, Stone was released from the hospital. Two weeks after that, she returned to work. Within days of returning to work, she was able to drive again. It was a recovery the couple considers nothing less than a miracle. In 2017, only three years married, facing the possibility of Stone’s death taught the couple a critical lesson: tomorrow is not promised. They began to think about their lives differently.

When Fulton was 20 years old, he made a 60-year plan for his life. Following Stone’s brain surgery, he realized he had accomplished everything in his plan: comfortably retiring earlier than most of his peers, remaining active in the tech industry and philanthropy, and nourishing the important relationships in his life. But shortly after Stone’s recovery, the couple looked at one another and asked: *What else can we do with our lives now?*

The first thing they did was take a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Italy. Ready to live every day as loud and full as they could, they decided to do something exciting, that neither one of them had ever done before. They travelled around the country recreating scenes from some of their favorite films, splicing them together to create a one-of-a-kind film of their own.

That film became *Il Sogno* (“The Dream”, in Italian) a feature-length, non-narrative travelogue documenting a group of 122 people on an Italian vacation. They reenacted scenes from movies they loved: *Roman Holiday*, *La Dolce Vita*, *Cleopatra*, *Gladiator*, *Death in Venice*, *Cinema Paradiso*, *Malèna*, *Il Postino*, *Life is Beautiful*, *The Godfather Part II*, and an HBO limited series that aired shortly before their trip called *The Young Pope*. Often, the tourists they encountered on their travels willingly joined them in taking on the roles of actors in the various scenes. The trip was a movie buff’s fantasy. They loved every minute of it.

Il Sogno culminates in the group of travelers attending a black-tie event hosted by the *ERG Italian Oscars*—the perfect way to celebrate everything they had done on their trip. BK was asked to MC the event and he even read an official letter from the Pope to the group of global travelers. This trip would become one of many to follow and it set the tone for what Stone and Fulton had settled on as their next act – to enjoy every moment they had together and to lift others as they climb.





BK&J in Soulidify Screening Room in Richmond.

After their trip, Stone and Fulton returned to Richmond and started their company.

That film company is Soulidify Productions—an investment house with nearly ten films completed and another two slated to wrap up by the end of this year. In addition to those listed above, the production company is also responsible for action features and dramas like *Atone* and *Hell on the Border* as well as the documentary *The Unity Ride*. Their film *Joseph* just won the African equivalent of the Oscars, taking home the *2020 Best Diaspora Film Feature* award at the 16th annual African Movie Academy Awards. The film *Freedom's Path* will be released this summer. This friendship film that takes place in the Antebellum South is already getting award buzz. It's sure to become a fan favorite.

But that's just the beginning. Films on deck include *From August with Love*, a book and film package that includes never-before-seen love notes from American playwright August Wilson and *Asira Awakens* the directorial debut of the ever-talented Malik Yoba, written by Christy S. Coleman. Fulton is especially amped about *Final Four: The Miracle Season*, a sports lover's dream film that tells the story of the 1983 NCAA Championship team from NC State. The film was co-written by Fulton and one of the men who lived that championship season, former basketball player Dereck Whittenburg.

Not one to leave his calendar empty, Fulton continues to lead the other pillars of Soulidify Productions as well: SoulVision Magazine and SoulVision.TV. As part of what the couple calls the "uplift cinema tradition," they give away the magazine and the TV network programming as part of changing the narrative on what is possible when inclusion and diversity are a core value. BK is a major investor in seven companies, ranging from his ever-expanding media empire to the kind of emerging technology that has interested him since he was a kid: augmented reality, cybersecurity, movies and gaming exchanges. He serves on the board of private companies like TowneBank and MediaU.com, institutions and nonprofits like Norfolk State University, The Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Media Mentors, and the Joan Trumpauer Mulholland Foundation.

Stone—who began her legal career at a time when there were



BK&J in Malibu with Steve and Candi McKeever. Steve is the founding CEO of Hidden Beach records.

not many partner positions available to women at U.S. law firms, and when diversity and inclusion weren't topics on everyone's mind—continues to help ensure attorneys of color are getting the same opportunities everyone else is getting, and that everyone is being acknowledged for the unique skills and perspectives they bring to the firm. As a partner and a mentor to young, emerging lawyers, she takes the extra effort to recognize as much diverse talent as possible. It's an endeavor she doesn't just rise to but exceeds.

One thing Stone and Fulton have always done is live their lives out loud. They go into everything full-force, and don't slow down. They do not accept mediocrity and at the same time they don't push aside or delay their dreams. They don't believe in leaving a single thing they want to achieve on the table. In other words, they go all in, on everything. "It's the only way to give greatness and love a chance," says Fulton.

As a couple, they believe that there is no place to go except towards bigger dreams and smarter work. They are also working with friends to help get better elected leaders and ensure that everyone can freely exercise their right to vote. They trust that if they do their part, *life* will do its part for them. This is something they have experienced time and again. Fulton often says, "God blesses all of us to turn our dreams and ideas into their tangible equivalents. But you have to have the faith, be willing to do the work, and expect the outcomes."

This couple has the faith. They do the work. They expect the outcomes. And, if you ask them, they're just getting started.



BK&J at Martha's Vineyard Sunday service with the President of the University of Richmond Dr. Ron Crutcher and his wife Dr. Betty Crutcher, with Mrs. Reesa Reynolds and the late Charles Reynolds.



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