

INTRIGUING PEOPLE: MALAAK COMPTON-ROCK

BACKGROUND

Malaak Compton-Rock

Born: Oakland, Calif.

Educated: Howard University

Lives: Alpine, since 2002

Family: Husband Chris and daughters Lola, 5, and Zahra, 3

Web sites she wants you to visit: angelrockproject.com; tnbcfoundation.org

On the jokes in her husband's routine about his wife not being funny: "I think that I'm funny. He doesn't, but I do. He tells people that if I were to get on stage, I wouldn't make people laugh. ... Well, he's right. [Being] funny on stage is a whole different thing. I'm very respectful of the gifts of standup comics. But I think I'm funnier than him in real life. He doesn't talk in real life."

On why she decided to do "Oprah's Big Give": "It's some of the most important television ever put on. I would say that even if I wasn't on it, because I'm a huge fan of Oprah and everything that she does. And she would not even consider going into prime time television without it being meaningful and having a philanthropic mission to it."

On what you'll find at angelrockproject.com: "I get letters and e-mails from people telling me that they want to volunteer, they want to serve, but they don't know how. ... The Web site is a place where people can come and learn. Literally there are some sites they can link to where you can put in your city, put in your area code and what [area of volunteerism] you're interested in, and they will come up with a list of organizations that need volunteers."



STAFF PHOTOS BY CARMINE GALASSO

Malaak Compton-Rock at the Bushwick Salvation Army community center, where her husband, comedian Chris Rock, went to camp as a kid in Brooklyn.

When it comes to charity, she's A-list

By VIRGINIA ROHAN
STAFF WRITER

Open April's Redbook and you'll see Malaak Compton-Rock posing with husband Chris Rock — part of a star-studded pictorial campaign she orchestrated to raise awareness about child abuse. Tune to ABC on Sunday nights and she's a judge on Oprah Winfrey's philanthropy-driven reality show, "Oprah's Big Give" — a gig that recently landed her on the cover of TV Guide.

But don't suggest to this glamorous Alpine humanitarian that she's now a celebrity.

"I'm not comfortable at all going in the limelight," Compton-Rock says. "I'm not comfortable with anything that isn't charity related."

She agreed to do "Big Give," she says, because the show — which has contestants competing to change the lives of strangers as creatively, dramatically and effectively as they can — is in keeping with all she stands for.

Compton-Rock calls the initiatives she coordinates or supports her "Angel Rock" projects. They include child abuse awareness and prevention; efforts in South Africa to help orphans of AIDS; Styleworks, which helps women move from welfare to work; aid to at-risk kids in Brooklyn, where her husband grew up; and the Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation.

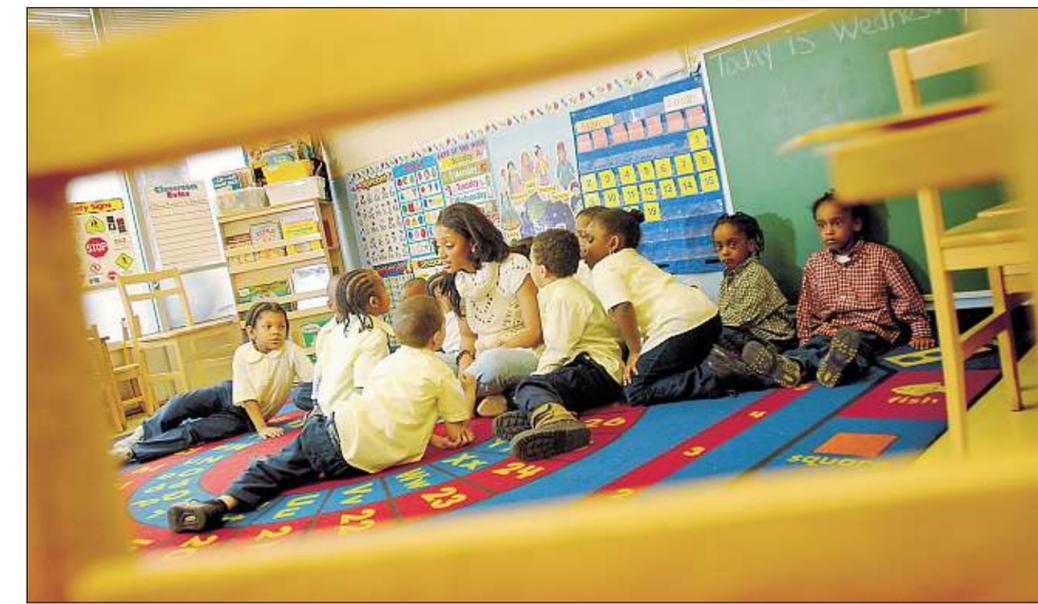
As the wife of a comic superstar — and before that, head of celebrity relations for UNICEF — Compton-Rock, who gives her age as "mid-30s," did her good deeds while deftly navigating the spotlight's periphery.

When Winfrey, whom she's known for years, called to ask her to be a "Big Give" judge, Compton-Rock's initial response stunned even her own mother.

"She said, 'I told her I had to get back to her,'" recalls Gayle Fleming, Compton-Rock's mom. "I said, 'You told Oprah Winfrey you'd get back to her? That's like telling God you have to get back to him.'"

Compton-Rock's favorite saying is: "Service is the rent we pay for living." The Marian Wright Edelman quote, from a book her mother gave her for her 23rd birthday, is among the inspirational aphorisms she had inscribed on the wall of her daughters' playroom, as a reminder to 5-year-old Lola and 3-year-old Zahra that "they are blessed and have to give back." "Malaak just is a really good person," says Sharon Fredman of Tenafly, who met Compton-Rock at a mother-child music class when their older daughters were babies.

When Fredman e-mailed a fund-raising appeal to the mothers in her daughter's play group — explaining that her close friend, Nancy Block-Zenna, had an aggressive type of breast cancer called triple negative — Compton-Rock immediately



Compton-Rock, who lives in Alpine and directs the Angel Rock Project, working with children at the Bushwick center.

responded. She ordered \$1,000 worth of merchandise — towels that said, "Peace, Love, and a Cure," which she sent to South Africa, where basics like towels are desperately needed.

Compton-Rock knew Block-Zenna, whose daughter went to camp with Compton-Rock's elder daughter. When she learned the 37-year-old Cresskill mom's dying wish was to start a foundation to raise research funds for this virulent but little-known cancer, Fredman recalls, "Malaak said, 'Do you want to have a fund-raiser at my house?'"

At that June event, they raised \$230,000.

"Nancy ended up passing away two months later," says Shelly Block, Nancy's mom. "But it was a wonderful comfort for her to know that it was such a success and that ... the foundation was on its way."

What drives Compton-Rock? "A lot of people in her position, especially smart people, realize not just the power that they have, but what comes from that power," says celebrity photographer and Fort Lee native Timothy White, who took the portraits featured in Redbook and became a good friend of Compton-Rock. "[There's] this sense of, I really can make a difference because of my position."

Her close friend, actress Holly Robinson Peete, says Compton-Rock "has always done philanthropy and never looked for the spotlight. Now, she's coming out of the shadow of her husband a little bit."

A hands-on mom

It's lunchtime at the Tenafly Diner, where Compton-Rock has chosen to meet. "This is the top spot for moms to come with their kids," the hands-on mom

says. "It's kind of centrally located, no matter where you live in Bergen County. And it's actually the best diner food on top of that."

When the Rocks decided to raise their kids in the suburbs, this Oakland, Calif., native had to look at a map to locate Bergen County. "My husband said, 'I really need to be close to the city, and the prettiest area I know closest to the city is Palisades Parkway,'" Compton-Rock recalls. "We found some beautiful homes in Franklin Lakes and Saddle River, but my husband was like, 'No, too far.'"

The two, married 11 years, met at the 1993 Essence Awards. ("Our first child, a 12-year-old Yorkie, is named Essence.") Compton-Rock, who never has her husband speak to the media on her behalf, says that he, too, gives generously, but "quietly."

Asked who most inspired her to give, Compton-Rock says, "My mom is extremely philanthropic, not in terms of money, but in terms of giving of her time and volunteering." That very day, her mother, who lives in Arlington, Va., was canvassing for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama in Ohio. And when Compton-Rock was in South Africa in January, she learned that her mom, Lola and Zahra had gone canvassing for Obama in Englewood.

Her mother, in turn, proudly recalls how her daughter — a Howard University graduate with a degree in arts production

management — left a job working for high-powered Manhattan PR executive Terrie M. Williams, whose clients included Eddie Murphy. "She was only 24 then, and she was working these crazy hours and she didn't have time to volunteer," Fleming recalls. "When Malaak quit that job, Terrie could not understand why and Malaak said to her, 'Because I really believe that service is the rent we pay for living, and I'm not paying my rent.'"

When Compton-Rock entered the non-profit world to launch a celebrity relations department for UNICEF, it was a "defining moment" in her life, she says. Charged with recruiting celebrities for fund-raising, she went on many trips with them. She firmly believes in the horizon-broadening power of travel.

"My children have been with me to the shantytowns in Johannesburg, South Africa. They have sat with people whose homes are literally cardboard boxes, metal shacks," she says. "They've met children that had AIDS. ... My children have seen it all."

And those lessons translate to their Alpine home, where the Rocks always have a "South Africa box" going. "The other day, my 3-year-old put on a pair of jeans and they were too small, and she said, 'Oh, let's go put them in the South Africa box,'" Compton-Rock says. "When I get about eight or 10 boxes, I ship them to one of our programs over there. And so, her mind just works like that."

Compton-Rock runs her South Africa

programs through Dr. Mark Ottenweller, global AIDS coordinator for Hope Worldwide. He remembers when UNICEF contacted him to say "a celebrity visitor wanted to visit a community AIDS program."

Ottenweller, now based in Philadelphia, after 18 years in Africa, arranged a visit to a settlement outside Johannesburg at Christmastime in 2005. "She came with her husband and her children, and they visited several families," he recalls. "Malaak was very engaged with the children, very personal, very warm."

The Rock family visited the community again when they returned to South Africa early in 2007 for the opening of The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls — this time with good friends Rodney and Holly Robinson Peete and their kids. When one young woman they'd met on their visits had a baby, she named him Chris Rock.

"The people in the community are overwhelmed that people so far away who are celebrities that have money and power would be interested in their everyday problems and needs," says Ottenweller.

A \$100,000 donation

On a weekday morning, Compton-Rock is at the Salvation Army Bushwick Community Center, where Chris Rock, who grew up in neighboring Bedford-Stuyvesant, went to summer camp and after-school programs as a kid.

In December, the Rocks held a Christmas party and shopping trip for 175 kids from the Bushwick center. They also showed episodes of Chris Rock's CW-network comedy "Everybody Hates Chris," about his Brooklyn childhood.

Using funds from a \$100,000 donation Target made to the center, Compton-Rock is now overseeing the refurbishing, redecorating and updating of the computer room and library, and the construction of a visual arts room. She's pushing to have these rooms open until midnight, like the gymnasium is. "I want to give them more options than just being able to play basketball," Compton-Rock says. "There's a stigma that's been around a long time now, the only thing that inner-city youth can do to take them off the streets is sports or rapping, and that's a horrible thing to me."

"The whole atmosphere is changing with Malaak involved with all these projects," says Sergio Lalanne, the center's director. "It is truly a blessing to us."

Compton-Rock is also hoping to take 30 "disadvantaged" Bushwick kids, ages 12 to 15, on a two-week trip to South Africa in August to "broaden their world view," introduce them to service and give them "a greater understanding of exactly how much they do have."

"I'm an in-the-trenches kind of girl," she says.

Just don't call her a celebrity.

E-mail: rohan@northjersey.com

"I'm not comfortable at all going in the limelight. I'm not comfortable with anything that isn't charity related."

MALAAK COMPTON-ROCK