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Royal wedding had Bowling Green link

By WES SWIETEK wswietek@bgdailynews.com 55 min ago

Joel Makonnen and Ariana Austin kiss at their wedding Sept. 9 in Maryland.

Photo courtesy of Dotun Ayodeji

A modern-day fairy tale that went viral has roots in Bowling Green.

Bobby Austin was born and raised in Bowling Green's Jonesville community in the 1940s. He received degrees from Western Kentucky University and Fisk University before getting his Ph.D. from McMaster University in Canada. In 1972, he became the first full-time African-American academic faculty member at Georgetown University. It was in Washington, D.C., that the youngest of his four children, Ariana, was born and raised.

But summers were a time for visiting family back in Bowling Green.

"My children spent their summers in Bowling Green," Bobby Austin said, visiting the small Warren County farm his brother Skip and his wife owned. There they rode horses and in pickup trucks and were "doing what I did – running around and running crazy," Bobby Austin said.

"I have very fond memories of summers spent in Bowling Green with my father's family – riding and showing horses, going to church and having pastries at Riley's bakery," Ariana Austin wrote in an email to the Daily News.

In Washington, Ariana Austin focused on her academics, eventually graduating from Harvard.

The "very serious woman," as her father describes her, made a fateful trip to a Washington, D.C., nightclub in 2005 and met a young man, who, as she learned later, happened to be a prince.

"One day she came home and said she met a very nice guy. No one thought anything about it," Bobby Austin said.

It was months later that Ariana Austin learned that Joel Makonnen was the great-grandson of Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia, and was therefore a bonafide prince. Ariana Austin also has a storied lineage via her mother, Joy Austin, whose father was lord mayor of Georgetown in Guyana.

The couple pursued their professional and academic work for the next decade before Makonnen finally proposed.

"They complement each other very much," Bobby Austin said. "We were very pleased when they decided to get married."

As they prepared for their Sept. 9 wedding, Ariana Austin submitted a wedding announcement to the New York Times.



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An editor from the paper subsequently called and asked if they could send a reporter and photographer to cover the wedding.

The couple said yes, and their elaborate, multi-day royal wedding was featured in the Times in an Oct. 13 story headlined, "She Met Her Prince (for Real!) at a D.C. Nightclub."

ABC News, the New York Daily News, Yahoo! and dozens of other international media outlets soon picked up the story, which has garnered millions of views across the world.

"Something struck a chord," Bobby Austin said. "It's a modern-day fairy tale."

"We were definitely not expecting this, but it's just a good love story in what feels like a crazy political time," Ariana Austin wrote. "We're happy it resonated and are really grateful for all the well-wishes."

Ariana Austin wrote that she most recently came back to Bowling Green for her aunt's funeral last year, but a royal couple visit may be in the works.

"I definitely want to visit soon with Joel," she wrote.

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