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At a Harlem Reunion, a Rancher From Missouri Meets His ‘DNA Cousins’

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)

Correction Appended

A rollicking gospel choir was shaking the floor of a Harlem brownstone when Vy Higginsen told the crowd around the soul food buffet to hush. The new cousin had arrived.

Ms. Higginsen, who runs a school for gospel singers in the brownstone, had organized this special family reunion to welcome to Harlem a newfound cousin she recently discovered through DNA testing.

And in walked the new cousin: a Missouri cattle rancher named Marion West, 76. It was Mr. West’s first visit to New York City, and he stood out partly because of his rancher outfit: black cowboy hat, shiny boots, string tie and a jacket advertising a feed company. But he also stood out because he was a white man greeted by a roomful of black New Yorkers embracing him as a long-lost member of their family.

“Welcome to Harlem,” Ms. Higginsen told Mr. West and his wife, Mack, as the crowd cheered. “Meet your DNA cousins,” Ms. Higginsen yelled to her relatives.

Mr. West’s ancestors owned slaves, and his grandfather fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. But there he was, wiping tears from his eyes and bowing his head in prayer, thanking God for his black cousins.

“Dear God, thank you for this beautiful night and this great family we got here,” he said in his heavy drawl. “My prayers have been answered. We just found the roots. It’s in the DNA.”

As genetic testing for ethnicity and ancestry has become more available to the public, more Americans are seeking information on their lineage. And many are confronting surprises in family background, racial makeup and newfound relatives.

A recent genealogical study indicated that ancestors of the Rev. [Al Sharpton](#), for instance, were once slaves owned by ancestors of Senator [Strom Thurmond](#), who ran for president in 1948 as a segregationist. A genealogical researcher has said that the white mother of Senator [Barack Obama](#), Democrat of Illinois, had ancestors who owned slaves.

In that Harlem brownstone earlier this month, DNA results brought about an unlikely pairing of two cousins — one from a cattle ranch in Missouri, the other from the stages and church choirs of Harlem. Each cousin, and their families, have embraced the other.

“If it’s my story, it’s many people’s story too,” Ms. Higginsen said. “It’s the real story of America. People are finally asking: ‘Whose blood is running through our veins? Who are we? Who of us is black, and who’s

white?’ They’re realizing there are no thoroughbreds among us, and nobody’s 100 percent anything in this country.”

Ms. Higginsen, who would not reveal her age, said she had been interested in her genealogical background ever since watching the television mini-series “Roots” in 1977. She assumed she was descended from slaves, and her maternal grandmother, Anna West, used to say the family had some American Indian blood. So in 2005 Ms. Higginsen took an ethno-ancestry test.

“I was stunned,” she said. “It said I had no Indian blood, but that I did have, in addition to my African ancestry, 28 percent European blood and 8 percent Asian.”

She persuaded her uncle, the Rev. James O. West Jr., a minister from Washington, to get a Y chromosome test.

Relatives always considered Mr. West black, but she said the results showed 52 percent European lineage and DNA that could link him to British royalty and the original settlers of colonial Jamestown, including Thomas West, an Englishman born in 1577 also known as the third Baron De La Warr, who became the first resident governor of the Virginia Colony.

“I was expecting Kunta Kinte,” Ms. Higginsen said, referring to the character in “Roots,” “but I got Lord De La Warr.”

Ms. Higginsen said she was especially broadsided by these revelations since her career and lifestyle have been shaped by her black heritage. She grew up in Harlem, the daughter of Randolph Higginson, a prominent Pentecostal pastor (as an adult, she changed her name to Higginsen) and she founded the Mama Foundation for the Arts, a school for black music and theater in a brownstone on West 126th Street in Harlem, where African art adorns her office.

She was a prominent D.J. for WBLS-FM and other stations with black listeners, published a lifestyle magazine for black audiences and worked for Ebony magazine. She helped write, produce and direct the gospel musical “Mama, I Want to Sing,” which opened in New York in 1983 and ran roughly 2,200 performances at the Heckscher Theater in East Harlem. The musical was based on her sister Doris Troy, a pop singer who wrote and recorded the 1963 hit “Just One Look.”

Ms. Higginsen is married to Ken Wydro, an author, producer and playwright whom she met in 1978 on a talk show where both appeared as guests to discuss the benefits of staying single. Mr. Wydro is white. Well, mostly — he recently had a DNA test that he said showed that he had 97 percent European lineage, but 3 percent from Africa.

Mr. West, the rancher from Missouri, was also always interested in his lineage. He had a DNA test done in 2005 and submitted the results to an online database of the West family, known as the West Family DNA Project, which collects DNA samples from people worldwide with the West surname. He saw that a certain Vy Higginsen from Harlem had submitted her uncle’s test results, which showed that the uncle and Mr. West shared a common ancestor.

So last year, Marion West called this Harlem niece of the minister.

“He said, ‘Hey, kiddo, I’m a cattle rancher from Poplar Bluff, Mo., and I hear we’re cousins,’ ” Ms. Higginsen recalled. “He said, ‘Who are you? What do you do?’ And I said the same to him.”

She assumed he was white, and he assumed she was black, but neither said anything about it. He sent her a picture, and she sent him information on her gospel school and waited to hear back. She did: Mr. West invited her down for Thanksgiving.

“I thought, ‘Surely, he must be crazy,’ ” said Ms. Higginsen, who wound up going down in January with her 22-year-old daughter, Knoelle.

“As soon as Vy stepped off the plane, I could see in her face she was a West,” Mr. West said. He took her to the ranch and to the community college he helped open. Then he took her up a hill to the pine tree where he prays daily. They knelt and thanked God for each other.

Mr. West’s visit to Harlem this month included tours of churches and soul food restaurants and lots of live music, including a youth choir organized by Ms. Higginsen and led by Cissy Houston, mother of the singer [Whitney Houston](#). Mr. West said the gospel songs reminded him of the “sharecropper songs” many of his black employees used to sing back home.

The West Cattle Company, he said, has had as many as 28,000 head of cattle. Mr. West said his paternal grandfather, James Sturdeman West, fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, as a Kentucky volunteer and then as a Tennessee volunteer. Although his ancestors may have had slaves, his father and grandfather would certainly not have objected to the news that they had black relatives.

“There would have been no shame in my immediate family, but going back a few generations, I’m sure there would have been some shame,” he said.

He brought laughter to the room when he spoke of cattle breeding.

“I’ve been breeding cattle all my life, and I’ll tell you, cross-breeding is better,” he said. “You mate the black angus with the other breeds, and you have better, healthier offspring.”

Correction: March 16, 2007

Because of an editing error, an article on Wednesday about a white Missouri man and a black Harlem woman who found out through genetic testing that they were related referred imprecisely to the given name of a performer who entertained during a New York family reunion. She goes by Cissy Houston, not Emily. (She was born Emily Drinkard.)

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