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## KEMBA IS PART OF THE FASTEST-GROWING GROUP IN THE U.S. PRISON SYSTEM – AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN.

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called mandatory minimums, judges are locking up the drug crowd for a long time, regardless of the role any one individual plays.

Kemba is part of the fastest-growing population in the U.S. prison system — the rate of criminal justice supervision for African-American women rose by 78 percent from 1989 to 1994. The number of African-American women in state prisons on drug-related charges has soared 828 percent from 1986 to 1991, according to the October 1995 report by The Sentencing Project, “Young Black Americans and the Criminal Justice System: Five Years Later.”

Barring some dramatic act of mercy by the Justice Department or some miraculous change of heart by a law-and-order Congress and president, Kemba may not see freedom until at least 2016. That’s five presidential elections from now, 10 congressional contests from now, 20 homecoming games from now, 20 college graduations from now. Her high school dream of becoming a business executive is but a fading memory.

It took less than three years for Kemba’s life in the Tidewater area of Southeastern Virginia to change. She went from outgoing high school student in suburban Richmond, Va., to main “mule” (carrying money and weapons) for a drug dealer preying on students at Hampton University, a historically Black institution in Virginia, to near-lifetime resident of the federal prison system. How she got there is a story of tough love, too much love and no love at all.

“Even today it gives me headaches,” says Kemba from the Federal Corrections Institution for Women in Danbury, Conn. She is dressed in her standard issue Army brown pants and mint green shirt. She is soft-spoken and shy, and only occasionally flashes a smile that spreads across her face. Still coming to grips with what has happened, Kemba is dismayed at her past actions. “It’s unbelievable. I was part of it. Right in the middle. And all along, I’m thinking, ‘I’m not doing anything wrong or wrong enough to go to jail.’”

### ~ MOM AND DAD

**K**EMBA WASN’T BORN WEALTHY. But she defies the stereotype of most women imprisoned on drug charges. She was born into a solidly middle-class family. She wasn’t an addict who sold drugs or committed other crimes to feed her habit. Her background was not that of a poor, inner-city youngster surrounded by the drug culture and with few life choices. She was reared in a comfortable home in the suburbs by parents who are professionals and who nurtured and loved her, gave her guidance and rules to follow. Kemba seemed to have had all the middle-class advantages that are associated with rearing a happy, successful child. Apparently, they weren’t enough.

Her parents, William and Odessa Smith, native Virginians, were college sweethearts who were reared by loving parents with values rooted in the Baptist church. The law-abiding couple has worked hard and steady since their days at the Norfolk



*Odessa and Gus Smith gave Kemba a comfortable home.*

Division of Virginia State College, now Norfolk State University.

Gus, as Kemba’s father is called, is 50 and the son of Augustus Smith and the Wilhelmina Dinkins Smith. His late father was the loyal valet to a vice president of the old Seaboard System Railroad Co., and his mother was a homemaker who reared Gus and his sister. He was in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. In high school, Gus played trumpet in the school band and sang in the church choir. He studied accounting at college and served three years in the U.S. Army, including a tour of duty in Korea.

Since his discharge from the army in 1971, Gus has worked for volunteer agencies, the last 21 years for the Capital Area Agency on Aging in Richmond, where he is chief financial officer. In addition, he runs his own accounting and tax firm with about 150 clients.

Odessa recalls fondly what she liked about Gus, a cool “Temptations man” of the 1960s, and why she married him almost immediately after college graduation.

“He had a special gentleness about him,” recalls Odessa, a petite woman with an inviting smile and soft voice. “He was handsome, very debonair, genuine. I was young and I was in love, and I just believed everything he said. I ate it up.”

Gus recalls just as fondly his first impressions of Odessa. It was the fall of 1963, their freshman year in college: “She was poised, attractive, intelligent. Things jelled. We were compatible. We were in love.”

Odessa, who turns 51 this spring, was one of nine children born to Flossie and Eugene Adams of Danville, Va. She was her parents’ first daughter after six sons. Her dad, a truck driver

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turned tobacco farmer who died last year at age 91, was about as serious as they come. "If hard work had anything to do with the quality of life, he had a good one," Odessa says.

When Odessa reached the first grade, her family moved from Danville to the rural part of the area. She remembers riding the bus every day, passing White public schools from which Blacks were barred, to the Black high school in Blairs, Va. There she studied hard, was in the drama club and Future Homemakers of America, was student council president and worked on the farm with her dad and brothers.

Dad kept Odessa on a short leash.

"He was just strict," she recalls. "I never really dated in high school. Even for the high school prom, I went, but my brother, David, had to ride in the car." And when the Student Government Association had an out-of-town trip, she recalls her dad really being unhappy about the prospect of his daughter being away from home overnight with strangers.

At Norfolk State, 194 miles from Danville, Odessa pursued a degree in business education. She pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority, Inc. and served as the chapter's secretary; was a candidate for Miss ROTC and met Mr. Right.

College classmates called Gus and Odessa the perfect couple; they married Dec. 27, 1967. Into this union, Kemba was born Aug. 28, 1971.

~ THE EARLY YEARS

**A**S FATE WOULD HAVE IT, medical problems prevented Odessa, who now teaches in Richmond's public high schools, from having more children. Everything they had would go into making Kemba's life perfect. To her parents, Kemba was an angel. What they thought she wanted, she got. What they thought she didn't need, they worked hard to avoid. No neglect here.

Growing up in the suburban Richmond community of Glen Allen, Kemba got opportunities that her parents never had. She attended modern, predominantly White public schools. She played piano. She took gymnastics and ballet. She was a Brownie and a Girl Scout. She got her driver's license at age 16, the same year she was introduced as an AKA debutante.

In high school, Kemba was active in the foreign language club, Students Against Drunk Driving and, like her mother, the Future Homemakers of America. Just as her father had played trumpet in his youth, Kemba played the flute for the 250-member Marching Panthers



*Kemba as a 6-year-old first-grader.*

Kemba was going," recalls her mother. "They knew if Kemba was going, it was 'okay.' Gussie and I were always protective parents because we would always go check things out."

There wasn't much dialogue between Kemba and her parents about the whats, whys and what ifs of life. Despite all the providing and the protecting, there was a certain emptiness that she could not express and her parents did not recognize. Over the years, Kemba became more and more dependent upon her parents to think for her; she simply yielded to avoid confrontations when she differed with them.

Kemba had a curfew and standards of conduct she was expected to keep. It appeared she toed the line well. She only once got a whipping when she was in high school and that was for getting home late from school.

Kemba was a daddy's girl. On days when schools were closed, she worked at her dad's office as his assistant. "He even did her hair better than I did," laughs Odessa. When Kemba needed to confide in someone, she chose him. She had learned early that while Odessa loved her, she did not like to hear bad news. "Even now, she will talk to him and tell him things she may not tell me," Odessa concedes.

But Kemba was developing into a young adult, and by high school she finally was beginning to make some of her own choices.

"Up until high school, most of her friends were White," her mother recalls. "In high school, she began to hang with the Black kids. She still kept her White friends. But she began to learn about racial issues, the history of segregation and just started hanging with Black kids."

Like many teenagers, Kemba also began quietly exploring the opposite sex.

"My mother never really talked with me about relationships with guys," Kemba recalls. "In high school, I let guys take advantage of me. If they asked for money



*Hermitage High School band, 1986.*

and I thought they were in need, I felt the need to give them some money, especially if I thought they liked me. Not many guys would come see me because my folks were so strict. So I would sneak off to see them. And she [Odessa] never really talked with me about her experience with men. I just saw her taking care of my dad. But I don't blame them for anything."

Kemba had her first showdown with her parents over choosing which college she would attend. After going on one of the popular Southern Black college tours, Kemba decided she wanted the "Black experience," after years of largely White settings. Her first choice was Spelman College in Atlanta, with Hampton and Howard universities tied for second.

For different reasons, neither parent approved.

Gus wanted Kemba to attend Radford, a predominantly White college in Virginia. He reasoned: "It wasn't that far away, they were offering a little money, the tuition was lower than Hampton, Howard and Spelman, and when you go into the real world, it won't be all Black." Odessa believed that historically Black colleges were in better shape than when she and Gus were in college but that Atlanta simply was too far. "I did not want to send my only child that far from home her freshman year."

Spelman did not accept Kemba. But she stood her ground and won a compromise. She persuaded her parents to let her attend Hampton, 73 miles away. The summer before she moved to Hampton, three male friends, aware that she was short on street smarts, warned Kemba, "Don't get hung up with these bad guys."

"They knew I was going to Hampton. They knew it was a party school, and they knew I was naive," Kemba recalls in an interview at the Danbury facility. She thanked her friends, two of whom were already students at Hampton, for the advice.

After graduation in June 1989, Kemba attended the pre-college program, then enrolled in Hampton that fall. Her mother and father helped her move in, making her dorm room "feel like home," stocking it with a color TV and microwave oven.

Pre-college classes had given Kemba a good head start. And indeed, there was a lot more freedom. She made new friends that summer and earned a B grade-point average. By fall, however, when regular classes started, it took only a few days for her to feel she was out of her element.

"When I went to Hampton, and you're surrounded by a



*Kemba, at age 16, was an Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority debutante.*

bunch of pretty girls, for some reason I felt I really didn't deserve to go to Hampton," says Kemba, wondering aloud whether her father pulled strings to get her admitted. She was an average high school student who didn't blow the roof off the college admissions test.

Self-image suddenly became a problem.

"I had gone to predominantly White schools. In those settings, I thought I was pretty. When I went to Hampton, I didn't feel I was equal to the next pretty girl because I saw them as

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more popular.... I wasn't sure of myself; my self-esteem was low. I would just look in the mirror and wonder why people were not as attracted to me and why I couldn't be as popular."

Kemba's look in the mirror reflected the wrong signal — that she was a loser. Lost at sea without an anchor, she became obsessed with trying to belong. It did not take long for the "bad guys" to find her.

#### ~ LIFE AT HAMPTON

**M**UCH OF KEMBA'S first semester was marked by partying with girlfriends at the off-campus apartments of guys (upperclassmen with whom she had gone to high school). Kemba, her roommate and two other girls usually hung together, and Kemba always saw herself as the least hip of the group. Marijuana floated fairly freely at most of the gatherings. "I smoked marijuana a lot, basically because it was around," Kemba says. "We didn't have to buy it. It was weird because nobody considered it was wrong. I didn't know I could go to jail for smoking marijuana."

By the end of the first semester, Kemba was striking out on several fronts. She failed two of her five classes. She also began lying to her parents about her whereabouts. Meanwhile, Derrick Finger, a high school classmate and close friend, accidentally killed himself that fall semester while handling a handgun during a visit to Hampton. It was Kemba's first experience with the death of a friend, and she was devastated by it. Derrick was one of the friends who had warned her about the "bad guys." Suddenly, Kemba was even more alone and more adrift.

The bad grades got Kemba's parents' attention and a warning that she would be called home if things didn't improve. Her mother was equally upset by her request for birth control pills.

"I felt I couldn't talk to my parents about certain issues," Kemba explains. "They always felt I was a little girl. They were strict, and I was scared of their response. We didn't have that much communication. We talked — 'How was school?' — but there wasn't much communication."

Kemba's father suggested that she see JoAnn M. Thomas-Wilson, a Richmond clinical psychologist. Kemba complied grudgingly.

"Kemba was in denial and wouldn't deal," observes Thomas-Wilson, who agreed to discuss the case with the family's consent. Kemba broke off the sessions after a few visits, saying everyone was blowing things out of proportion. In reality, things were already out of hand.

By the end of her freshman year, Kemba was a failing student, a regular marijuana smoker and a party girl who still perceived herself as unpopular. Though she had landed a boyfriend, Derrick Johnson, an upperclassman at Virginia Union University in Richmond, he was being trashed by her girlfriends. Derrick didn't have a car, he wasn't a flashy dresser and he frequently didn't have any money. That was just the opposite style of the fast company her girlfriends were keeping.

Kemba's sophomore year was more of the same. Derrick had become increasingly frustrated with her. He suspected she was lying. Frustrations turned into fights, followed by apologies and more fights and more apologies. His suspicions were right: Kemba had been lying. She had begun to date Peter Michael Hall, a flamboyant young man from New York whom she had seen from a distance her freshman year.

One night in the spring of her sophomore year, Derrick called Kemba, but she was with Peter. Derrick went to Hampton and waited until she returned. When she arrived, he confronted her. They argued. Later, when Derrick told Kemba's



*Kemba, kneeling far right, as a Hampton freshman, was in a tight-knit group.*

parents he was concerned that she was "messing with somebody who's not good for her," Kemba formally ended the relationship.

Kemba had met Peter at a friend's apartment in Hampton. She had seen him before at several parties. The parties usually involved the "25 Crew," a group of young men, mostly students, that Kemba's girlfriends were close to. "The house could be dead before [Peter] came in," Kemba recalls. "When he did, everybody woke up. After that first encounter, it was like he noticed me and I couldn't wait until I bumped into him again."

Peter was eight years older than Kemba. She didn't know if he was a student and it didn't matter. In a way, he was to

Kemba what Gus was to Odessa. She was swept off her feet by his presence, the way he moved in a crowd and his sexy Jamaican accent. Kemba remembers Peter as “articulate, fun, a charmer, self-confident and crazy. He would start a trend instead of following one. He was very hyper, always had to be going fast, moving. If you didn’t go fast, he would jokingly ask, ‘What’s wrong with you, American?’”

Nearly everyone in Kemba’s circle, men and women, seemed impressed with Peter, his clothes, his cars, his commanding presence. Few seemed to know that he had built a rap sheet at police stations in Newport News, Virginia Beach and Hampton. Peter, at that time, was buying cars under false names and selling drugs, according to the government’s presentencing investigation report on Kemba, prepared in December 1994. He also was on the radar screen of federal drug agents.

“This guy was just an influential person, a behind-the-scenes nemesis. He was a street demon,” says a college friend and former high school classmate of Kemba’s who knew Peter casually. He doesn’t want to use his name for fear even today of being harassed by Peter’s associates. “When his name came up, you never spoke against him. You always knew what you heard about him, different wild stories. The more stuff you heard, the deeper you went into your shell.”

Late one night in the spring of 1991, Peter called Kemba. He asked her to meet him. When she came to his car from her dorm room, he asked her about her “booty bag,” a reference to an overnight bag. Stunned, Kemba said she had no intention of staying with him and returned to her room. Minutes later, Peter called again, sweet-talked her and soon she was *en route* to his apartment, booty bag in hand. She was scared, especially when he asked her to wear a blindfold on the way to his place. She complied anyway.

If Kemba was impressed with Peter, she was even more impressed with his apartment: “better furniture, better music system, three TVs in one room, big speakers, a tri-level apartment with a garage. I guess it was just different from any guy’s I had been in before.” With “Let’s Chill” by Guy playing on Peter’s stereo, the two consummated their relationship.

Almost immediately Peter and Kemba became an item, at least in her mind. She became “the talk” of her crowd. “I had seen the other girls Peter had been involved with before,” says Kemba. “They were smart, pretty, dean’s list, and I just couldn’t believe he went out with me. I had heard he was dealing drugs, but hadn’t seen it. I didn’t question how he had all these things because it seemed like it was accepted by everybody.”

Peter never told Kemba she was his main girl, “but in the



*Kemba, center, and friends in spring 1992 at a party in Newport News, Va.*

“I HAD HEARD HE WAS DEALING  
DRUGS, BUT HADN’T SEEN IT. I DIDN’T  
QUESTION HOW HE HAD...THINGS.”

summer he showed me. That’s when he showed me I meant more [to him] than I thought.”

Kemba had gone to Philadelphia with friends for a Greek picnic. It was her first trip North as a college student. Peter, who had come to the City of Brotherly Love separately, called her one night and asked her to come to his hotel room. She thought nothing of it until she arrived. He told her that he had seen her earlier, holding hands for a moment with another man; he wanted to know what it meant. When she explained there was nothing to it, that the man was a total stranger, Peter berated her and warned her of the dangers of such encounters.

“He went off and said, ‘I’m going to show you what could have happened.’” He began hitting and choking her. “When I held my hands up to try to stop him, he told me to put them