

CCH Pounder

Actor

BY BEKAH WRIGHT

She may be a TV veteran, but CCH Pounder got her start in New York theater, appearing in such productions as playwright Richard Wesley's *The Mighty Gents* and Broadway's *Open Admissions*. She moved to the small screen when she relocated to Los Angeles in 1982. In addition to recurring roles in a number of series, including *ER*, Pounder's restrained yet intense performance as detective Claudette Wyms in the gritty FX series *The Shield* garnered her nominations for both an Emmy and an NAACP Image Award and solidified her place in TV. On the CBS series *NCIS: New Orleans*, the Guyana-born thespian, 62, plays chief medical examiner Dr. Loretta Wade. She researched the role at the County of Los Angeles Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner. Though she found the key to what makes her character tick in the morgue, her time in New Orleans has tuned up her creativity in other ways.

Any favorite places you've discovered in New Orleans?

Swamps where bodies half-eaten by alligators wash up seem to fascinate the Los Angeles-based series writers; I've seen a lot of alligators in a short amount of time. Of course, there's the iconic French Quarter. New Orleans also has an interesting architecture, age (it's definitely one of the oldest American cities), and spirit. There are so many areas in the city where several different layers of society have come through and established themselves, creating this kind of wonderful atmosphere you can't quite place your hand on. I'm living in a converted warehouse with aging brick—a place most people from California would avoid. Buildings like these are being reoccupied and reused because of Hurricane Katrina. People now see old, abandoned

buildings in a different light, as usable, livable space. This rehabilitation has added an old-new pioneering spirit to the city that's superfun.

What was your impression of California when you first visited? From the sky, I'd never seen anything so vast and well lit as Los Angeles. I was so naive, I asked the gentleman sitting next to me on the airplane, "What state is that?" In an *Oh, you ignorant peasant* way, he replied, "Lady, that's the city of Los Angeles."

What was the first thing you did on that visit? To do some reconnaissance of the different neighborhoods, I took a bus from Echo Park to the end of the line in Santa Monica. It was 82 degrees when we started, but by the time we reached Santa Monica, the fog had rolled in and I needed a coat.

Do you have any favorite spots in L.A.? I like walking in Larchmont, by the back gate of Griffith Park, and Dockweiler State Beach. There are other spots I love at certain times: Leimert Park during a festival, downtown Los Angeles to catch performing arts, and driving on Pacific Coast Highway beyond Malibu Canyon Road to buy fish. The first time I traveled that route, I saw dolphins and practically drove off the road.

Where do you like to eat? As a seafood person, I love Natalee Thai on Venice Boulevard and Crustacean on South Santa Monica Boulevard. I have a weakness for desserts at The Alcove on Hillhurst Avenue. I also like joints where you don't necessarily want to sit and eat. There's unbelievable takeout at Wi Jammin' Caribbean Restaurant on Pico Boulevard; Natraliart

Market and Restaurant on Washington Boulevard; and Awash Ethiopian Restaurant on Pico Boulevard, a mom-and-pop place, where they treat you like family.

Do you remember your first car? The car I learned to drive in was a 1970 Dodge Dart recommended by my father. It was tank-like, so if you had an accident, the car would get hurt and not you. I called her Miss Pool because she was swimming-pool blue. I used to talk to her like a friend: "I've only got \$1 worth of gas, Miss Pool. Please get me home."

What do you drive these days? An electric-blue Prius that was a gift from [producers] James Cameron and Jon Landau when we were filming *Avatar*. I love its silence when rolling up my driveway. **W**

