James Garrett Jr. and Paola Sanchez-Garrett, are newlyweds. She is from the Dominican Republic. Though he was born in Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, he has deep Saint Paul roots that in effect, make him a Twin Cities native. They were my guests recently on Conversations With Al McFarlane on KFAI FM 90.3.

You can listen to the interview at http://feeds.feedburner.com/insightnews/conversationswithalmcfarlane .

Al McFarlane
You and Paola both are in the same profession and own a business that can grow as your family grows. How did you meet? Paola, you tell the story.

Paola Garrett
We actually met in a social network. We were friends for a couple of years and then we started dating for a while. The love was there and now we are together, married and happy, very happy.

AM
You told me how he proposed to you.

PG
You know, I am not a perfect English speaker but I will try. He invited me to a jazz concert in Santiago, my city in Dominican Republic. I was not so excited about the invitation but I said, you know what, this guy is visiting here for me, so let's go. When we got there, all my friends were there. I said "Oh my god, this is fun. Everybody is here!"

JG
It was a coincidence.

PG
Coincidence or something, I thought. At one point, the jazz singer was saying something like, "I want to sing a song for a couple here tonight. The guy wants to propose marriage to the girl." And I said, "Oh my God! That is cool." Then she started singing. I was like, "Oh my God!" Because it was our song.
I couldn't believe what he was doing. He was standing and holding my hand. We were dancing. All the people there were laughing and screaming. Ladies were crying. It was a whole situation. I couldn't believe it. It is on Facebook and it was on YouTube, too. I mean it was a full situation. Until this day people look at me in the streets in Santiago and say "Hey you are the girl who ..."

AM
So, a famous love affair?

PG
Yes, something like that.

AM
Paola, you teach at the University. What is your background?

PG
Well I am architect. I am also a city planner in Santiago. I studied at Pontificia Universidad Catolica Madre y Maestra in Santiago and I teach urban planning there.

AM
Your family is renowned because your famous father is a media personality.

PG
Yes, he is a character. My father is a TV producer there. He used to be a famous DJ in the 60s to the 80s. Now he is more or less just in TV production.

JG
He is not just in TV production. He is a TV personality. I think he has like the longest running show on the island. He is on Monday to Friday in the 7 o'clock primetime slot.

AM
He is the dean.

JG
He is the guy. He is in front of the camera and he is also producing. But he is a TV personality.

AM
I raised the question in order to sort of paint this picture of your new family. Family is so important. You also talked about your mother, Paola. About how wonderful and strong a woman she is.

PG

Yes, we are three, I am the oldest and definitely, to have that kind of family is very important. The family is something that I always remember. The family teaches us how to be good people, to give the best of ourselves for ourselves and for each other. It is really important for me and I always remember that.

AM
And James you come from a lineage of accomplishment as well. Talk about your family background here in Saint Paul.

JG
My family goes way back to the late 1800s here in Saint Paul. I am a fifth generation Saint Paulite. I wasn't born here as you mentioned earlier. I was actually born in Charlotte Amalie in the US Virgin Islands, but my family moved back here. My mom's side of the family is from here. So we have been in Saint Paul pretty much in the same part of Saint Paul, for over a 100 years. And my grandfather's godfather was the first Black municipal architect in the United States. Cap Wigington was the city architect in Saint Paul I think from the teens through the 50s.
My grandfather, James Griffin, in 1972 became the highest ranking urban police officer in the United States when he became St. Paul Police Department Deputy Chief. He was 42 years on the police force. He was elected to the St. Paul School Board and served 16 years on the school board.
Saint Paul Central High School Stadium is actually named after my grandfather. And the Saint Paul police headquarters is also named James S. Griffin Building.
My mother Linda, formerly Griffin-Garrett, was a long time Saint Paul public school teacher. She spent 30 plus years in education, creating the multicultural agenda for education. She was an education consultant for the State of Minnesota for several years as well.
So you know there was sort of a foundation that was put in place and there were certain expectations instilled in my brother, Christopher and me when we were growing up that we were going to be successful. We were going to dream and we were going to proceed to chase down those dreams and try to execute them.

AM
I see, in talking to both of you, legacy and dynasty. We talked about legacy already: Paola, your rooted family in Santo Domingo in Dominican Republican and James, your family in Saint Paul. But dynasty in that not only are you attracted to each other as two individuals who bring legacy to the table, but you also bring your professional expertise and your hopes. You own a architectural firm called 4RM+ULA with offices here in St. Paul and also in Dominican Republic. What's the vision for your enterprise?

JG
4RM+ULA actually turned 10 on July 1st this year. We have been practicing architecture here in Twin Cities based in Saint Paul for 10 years. We are licensed here to practice architecture in Minnesota and I hold a New York State license. We do some work in New York City. We are looking to expand that. She is licensed in the Dominican Republic and we formed a version of 4RM+ULA in the Dominican Republic and we are currently pursuing work down there. So really the vision is to create several satellites, to spur off of the home in Minnesota. I feel like the sky is the limit. I feel like we spent 10 years paying dues, learning the craft. For many years before

that we worked for other firms and under other architects, being mentored. For the last 10 years on our own we have been really learning quite a bit about business, about commerce, about the importance of just really being on point with your regulations and your finances. With that sort of foundation under us, we are ready to run pretty fast.

AM
Your biggest project to date is the Light Rail project between Minneapolis and St. Paul.

JG
We were brought in to be part of the proposing team in 2007 for the Central Corridor Light Rail and we are part of a successful winning team with AECOM. We worked with AECOM in the capacity of architectural designers basically executing station design for all 18 stations along the Central Corridor route including a station right out front here (on Cedar Avenue). We have done that for approximately five years and had a chance to really touch and manipulate and put our fingerprints all over every single one of the stations. So that is probably our most notable work to date. It is something that we will be using. It runs right through our neighborhood, a block from my house. It runs right in front of our office. So it is very rare that as an architect you have an opportunity to actually do something that is going to benefit you yourself and your community and that you are going to be able to look at every single day of your life.

AM
I see you and Paola as part of the hip-hop generation. To me, that means there is a will for self-development and confidence and a sense that we have the capacity to change the world and make the world what we want it to be. We are not dependent on somebody else defining us. We have an obligation, a duty and the power to define ourselves and our future. Does that make sense you?

JG
Yes. But there are several sorts of hip hop generations. There are the originators of the culture that were actually doing it in the late 70s and early 80s. We were part of that first generation that grew up in a world where hip-hop was there. We can't remember a time before hip hop. So we were the first generation from kindergarten through the rest of our lives to just be a part of it.
I think hip-hop a lot of it is doing the most with less. We went through the protest movement in the 80s with the "Stop The Violence" movement and talked about self-determination and the ability to self-define. That is what we are trying to do.

AM
What is the guiding principle that directs you, either from hip-hop space or from your parents and from legacy? What is it that is in the back of your mind and at the base of your heart as you pursue life and career?

JG
For me it is responsibility. I feel like I owe a huge debt to the ancestors and those whose shoulders I stand upon. I have also been presented with a lot of opportunities and to capitalize on those opportunities is something that I feel very responsible for.

AM
And Paola what about you, what are your thoughts?

PG
I think it is honesty. It is the combination. James is a real responsible man. And I think I am very honest. I am honest with myself. I am honest with him all the time. And I try to be honest with the rest of the world. It is important in these days to be honest and responsible.