

Steeped in talent

Sisters host third annual mother-daughter tea to help raise funds for nonprofits and honor female entrepreneurs

By **KAREN IRIS TUCKER**
Correspondent

In an event as tasteful as a Martha Stewart soiree and as inspirational as one conjured by Oprah, a mom and her two girls in Piscataway are adding their own humble touch of joy to this holiday's season, hosting their third-annual mother-daughter charity tea.

Three years ago, Deborah Muse-Carty, an assistant director of Investor Relations at the pharmaceutical company NexMed, challenged her daughters, Nia, now 12, and Kiara, 17, to devise a way to give back to their community.

"I wanted them to understand that you can't hold on to everything that you have," Muse-Carty said. When the girls suggested holding a clothing drive, accompanied by a tea party, Muse-Carty guided Nia and Kiara as they scouted out a location, developed a theme for the event and solicited local businesses for contributions.

The resulting tea took place in the back room of Port Africa, a cozy art gift shop. The free event was partially funded by Nia and Kiara, who squirreled away their allowance and money awarded to them by their parents for honor-roll report cards. Attendees — about 10 families — were asked to bring girls' and women's clothing for donation to a local charity. The mothers who came were encouraged to read a poem or some prose that expressed their feelings for their daughters.

"We thought people would joke around and not take it seriously," said Muse-Carty of the readings. "But I have to tell you, there was not a dry eye in the house."

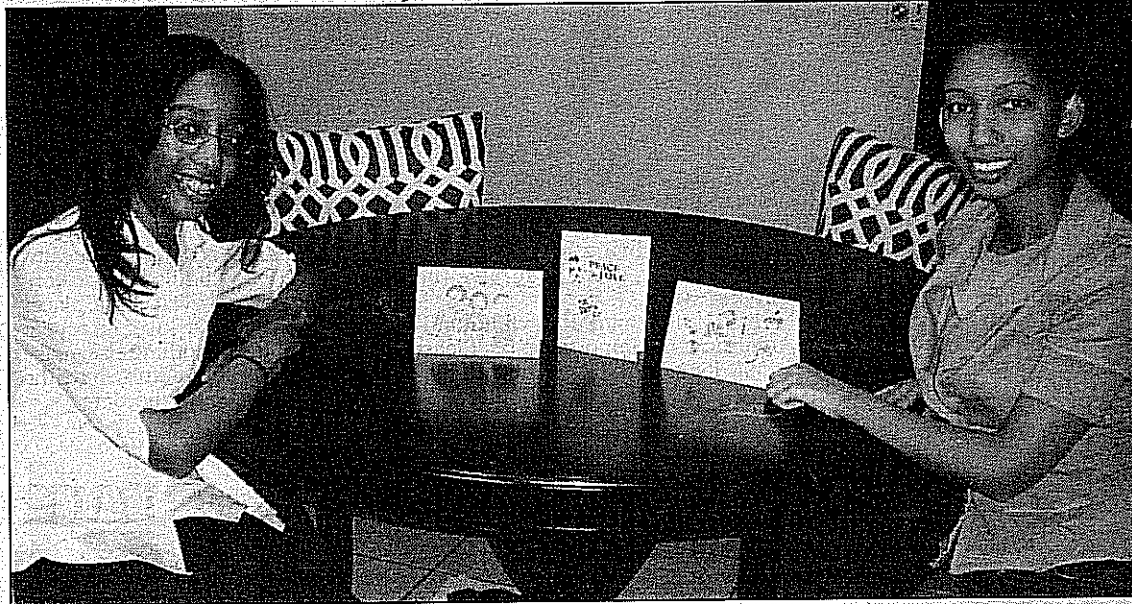
Buoyed by the response, the girls conducted another charity tea the following year, doubling their participants.

The girls also launched Tea Party and Things, a Web-based greeting-card business, to help fund their philanthropic efforts, with Nia at the helm as designer of the cards and Kiara as the writer.

The cards are designed to "represent the uniqueness of the African-American family, as well as all families," says the Web site. One card features an irreverently etched ringing cell phone, with the text-message-inspired line, "Holiday message waiting: Merry Xmas n a Hpy New Yr."

Kiara, a senior at Piscataway High School, hopes this year's tea, which will be held at the Embassy Suites hotel, will yield an even larger draw.

"We're going to have a mother-



DEBORAH MUSE-CARTY

Kiara (right), 17, and Nia, 12, Muse-Carty pose in their Piscataway home with some of the greeting cards they create and sell on their Web site, www.teapartyandthings.com, to fund the third-annual mother-daughter charity tea and clothing drive they will host from 2 to 5 p.m. Dec. 17 at the Embassy Suites in Piscataway.

and I always have to stand in front of everyone and introduce ourselves," she said.

Muse-Carty promises the gathering will feature a delectable menu: "All different types of tea, along with cakes like pineapple-coconut, red velvet, banana-walnut and German chocolate."

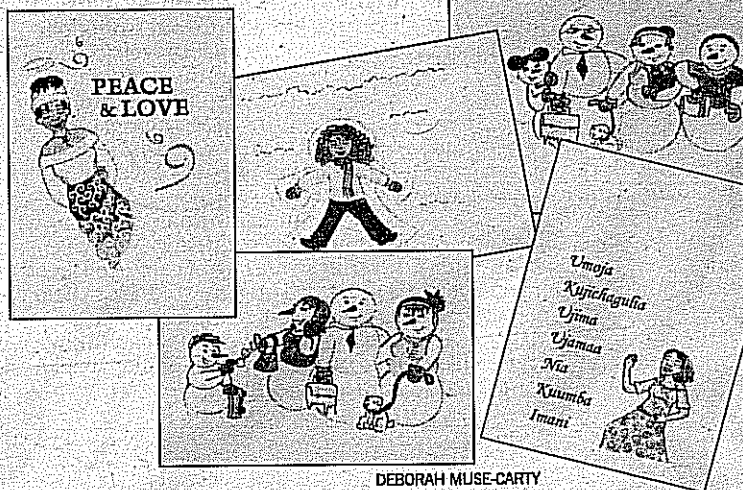
As for the dress code, Muse-Carty said the annual event, which always has taken place on a Sunday at 2 p.m., usually yields attendees still dressed in their church-going finery. She said she expects between 100 and 150 people this year, with proceeds going to the FBC Katrina Relief Fund and also a local charity, FISH Hospitality Program, which services the homeless in Middlesex County.

The Muse-Cartys are adding a new component to the tea, the "Stepping out on Faith Award," for female entrepreneurs who are proven role models.

Kristine Smith, owner of Inspira Dance studio in New Brunswick, is one honoree; the other is East Orange resident Dawn Fitch, president of Pooka Products, a bath and body product line.

Joanne Bakersville of Piscataway and her daughter Deanna are long-time friends of the Muse-Cartys. Both have served on the planning committee for this year's tea, securing donations from area businesses including Target, Macy's, Bear Rock Café, and attorney Christopher Roberts.

"It's really nice to see mothers and daughters gather," said Bakersville, adding that she also has served as a



DEBORAH MUSE-CARTY

A collection of greeting cards created by Kiara and Nia Muse-Carty to generate funds to support their mother-daughter charity tea.

Somerset resident Patrice Williams, 48, a contingency planner for Citigroup, has also done event planning for the tea. She said, "I enjoy the fact that mothers and daughters can come together and reflect on their relationship." She added, "It's great to allow other families to see what the Cartys have done in terms of starting this charity."

Daughter, Paige, 17, echoes her mother's feelings about the Cartys.

"I find it an inspiration to kids my age that Nia and Kiara have their own foundation, a tea and a card business."

Muse-Carty is looking ahead, viewing those entrepreneurial efforts as a lasting opportunity for her daughters.

"I tell my girls all the time, this is a real business. My vision is that when they graduate from college, they won't have to work for anyone else."

Tickets to the third-annual mother-daughter tea are \$20 (admits two). For more information, call (732) 980-0500, e-mail