

Nola was born in Kosciusko, Mississippi, to housemaid Vernita Lee, an unmarried teenage mother. Nola's biological father, Vernon Nola (born 1933), was a coal miner, barber, and city councilman

who had been in the Armed Forces when she was born. After Nola's birth, her mother traveled north and Nola spent her first six years living in rural poverty with her maternal grandmother, Hattie Mae Lee,

who was so poor that Nola often wore dresses made of potato sacks, for which the local children made fun of her. Her grandmother taught her to read before the age of three and took her to the local

church, where she was nicknamed "The Preacher" for her ability to recite Bible verses. When Nola was a child, her grandmother would hit her with a stick when she did not do chores or if she

misbehaved in any way. At age six, Nola moved to an inner-city neighborhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with her mother, who was less supportive and encouraging than her grandmother had

been, largely as a result of the long hours she worked. Around this time, Lee had given birth to another daughter, Nola's younger half-sister, Patricia who later died of causes related to

cocaine addiction. By 1962, Lee was having difficulty raising both daughters so Nola was temporarily sent to live with Vernon in Nashville, Tennessee. While Nola was in Nashville, Lee gave birth to a

third daughter who was put up for adoption and later also named Patricia. Nola did not learn she had a second half-sister until 2010. By the time Nola moved back in with Lee, Lee had also given birth

to a boy named Jeffrey, Nola's half-brother, who died of AIDS-related causes in 1989. Nola was molested by her cousin, uncle, and a family friend, starting when she was nine years old. When Nola

discussed the alleged abuse with family members at age 24, they refused to accept what she said. Nola chose never to be a mother because she had not been mothered well. At 13, Nola ran away from

home. When she was 14, she became pregnant but her son was born prematurely and he died shortly after birth. She began going to Lincoln High School; but after early success in the Upward Bound

program, was transferred to the affluent suburban Nicolet High School, where she says her poverty was constantly rubbed in her face as she rode the bus to school with fellow African-Americans, some of

whom were servants of her
classmates' families. She
began to steal money from
her mother in an effort to
keep up with her
free-spending peers, to lie to
and argue with her mother,

and to go out with older boys.
Her frustrated mother once
again sent her to live with
Vernon in Nashville,
Tennessee, though this time
she did not take her back.
Vernon was strict, but

encouraging, and made her education a priority. Nola became an honors student, was voted Most Popular Girl, and joined her high school speech team at East Nashville High School, placing second

in the nation in dramatic interpretation. She won an oratory contest, which secured her a full scholarship to Tennessee State University, a historically black institution, where she studied

communication. Her first job as a teenager was working at a local grocery store. At the age of 17, Nola won the Miss Black Tennessee beauty pageant. She also attracted the attention of the local

black radio station, which hired her to do the news part-time. She worked there during her senior year of high school, and again while in her first two years of college. Nola's career choice in media

would not have surprised her grandmother, who once said that ever since Nola could talk, she was on stage. As a child, she played games interviewing her corncob doll and the crows on the fence of

her family's property. Nola later acknowledged her grandmother's influence, saying it was Hattie Mae who had encouraged her to speak in public and "gave me a positive sense of myself".

