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MARY JANE MCLEOD BETHUNE

by Rochelle Sheppard*

Drive motivated by vision. Excellence fueled with a spirit of determination. Each of these traits distinguish Mary Jane McLeod Bethune, a woman of power. Bethune was a woman born with a desire to make an impact in the lives of others. Her driving force and desire are most aptly seen in the words of her Last Will and Testament.

> I leave you love; I leave you hope; I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one anther; I leave you a thirst for education; I leave you a respect for the use of power; I leave you faith; I leave you racial dignity; I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with you fellow men; I leave you a responsibility to our young people.[1]

Mary Jane McLeod Bethune was born to Samuel and Patsy McIntosh McLeod on July 10, 1875 in Mayesville, South Carolina. Former slaves, Samuel and Patsy were the parents of seventeen children. Mary was the only one born free. She was born ten years after slavery was abolished. After the Emancipation Proclamation her parents continued to work for their former master until they had earned enough money to buy five acres of land. The family built their first cabin by cutting and splitting the wood themselves.

When Mary was a young child, she endured an experience she never forgot. She had gone to one of the homes in town to deliver the laundry. While there she picked up a book and the little girl of the house took it away from her saying, "You can't read." From then on she was determined to learn how to read and write. Within a year she was given the opportunity to go to school. Mrs. Bethune fondly said, "A knock on our door changed my life over-night."[2]

Emma Wilson, a black educator from a northern Presbyterian mission established a school five miles away from the McLeod home. Mary was chosen to be the one to go to school and teach the others the three R's. Each day Mary walked the five miles to Emma's school. The curriculum consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, and the Bible.

> My teacher had a box of Bibles and texts, and she gave me one of each for my very own. That same day the teacher opened the Bible to John 3:16, and read: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
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> With these words the scales fell from my eyes and the light

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> came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. "Whosoever," it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just "whosoever." It meant that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day.[3]

Along with the spiritual teaching Mary was able to give to her family, her family and neighbors "relied on her to help them with their financial transactions as they prepared to sell their cotton in the market."[4] Because school was only in session the three months between planting and harvest; (farming families could not manage without putting their children to work in the fields), Mary tried to cram all the learning she could into those three months.

Mary's graduation from the Mayesville school was one of the most gratifying events of her life. Her parents, Samuel and Patsy, watched with pride as she received her diploma. Mary graduated in 1886 and was offered a scholarship, which was provided by Miss Mary Crissman from Denver, Colorado, to Scotia Seminary, a school for Black women, in Concord, North Carolina. Here, she learned the meaning of the word brotherhood. At Scotia Mary met white people who proved that they believed in practicing the Christian principles they preached.

Upon graduation from Scotia, she secured another scholarship from Miss Crissman to attend Moody Bible Institute in Chicago in hopes of becoming a missionary to Africa. "At Moody, Mary met black and white people from all over the world. This cosmopolitan experience proved to be a distinct asset in the years to come. Her ability to get along with all types of people was the result of her experiences at Moody."[5] In her free time she visited prisoners, offered counseling to the needy, and traveled with Moody students to the Midwest and established Sunday schools. "For two years, Mary McLeod toured throughout the South, helping the institute set up new missions. She traveled with her Bible team, serving as chief vocalist; occasionally she preached on these missions."[6] Upon graduation Mary received one of the greatest disappointments of her life when she learned the Presbyterian Board of Missions did not accept black missionaries. Sorrowful McLeod returned to Mayesville as Emma Wilson's teaching assistant. A year later she was hired as a teacher in Augusta, Georgia at the Haines Normal and Industrial Institute, a school for black children. Richard Rennert, in his book, *Shapers of America*, says,

> There McLeod organized an unusual Sunday school program for her pupils. They visited children in nearby shacks and gave them baths and distributed clothing, soap, toothbrushes, and other personal hygiene items. Africans in America needed

> Christ and school just as much as Negroes in Africa, McLeod realized. My life work lay not in Africa but in my own country.[7]

Later McLeod moved to The Kindell Institute in Sumter, South Carolina, where she met and married Albertus Bethune who was also a teacher. The couple had one son Albert. Six months later Bethune moved to Palatka, Florida where she organized a Sunday school program and visited prisoners in jail.

> The idea of "mission" had imbued Bethune's early thinking. Since leaving school she had professed a desire to do missionary work in Africa. The desire was inspired both by religion and by a special feeling regarding her heritage: she had often expressed pride that pure African blood flowed in her veins and that her mother had come from a matriarchal tribe and royal African ancestry.[8]

With her strong desire to help others and convinced of the importance of missions. Bethune decided to make America her primary mission field. She had always wanted to open a school for impoverished Negro girls, so she concentrated her energies on establishing a school for girls in Daytona, Florida. With only her faith in God, $1.50, and a vision to help others, Bethune founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls on October 4, 1904. Her enrollments consisted of five little girls and her own son. Each child paid fifty cents weekly for tuition.

> We burned logs and used the charred splinters as pencils, and mashed elderberries for ink. I begged strangers for a broom, a lamp, a bit of cretonne to put around the packing case which served as my desk. I haunted the city dump and the trash piles behind hotels, retrieving discarded linen and kitchenware, cracked dishes, broken chairs, pieces of old lumber. Everything was scoured and mended. This was part of the training to salvage, to reconstruct, to make bricks without straw. As parents began gradually to leave their children overnight, I had to provide sleeping accommodations. I took corn sacks for mattresses. Then I picked Spanish moss from trees, dried and cured it, and used it as a substitute for mattress hair.[9]

In less than two years the school's enrollment grew to 250 pupils. Bethune soon saw the need to expand. She purchased a piece of ground which was originally a garbage dump with five dollars down and a verbal agreement to pay the $250 balance in two years. Bethune did not know how she was going to pay for the land but she had faith that God would guide her to the right people who would empathize with her cause.

Gerda Lerner, in her book, Black Women in White America, quotes

Bethune as saying,

> I hung onto contractors' coat-tails, begging for loads of sand and second-hand bricks. I went to all the carpenters, mechanics, and plasterers in town, pleading with them to contribute a few hours' work in the evening in exchange for sandwiches and tuition for their children and themselves. Slowly the building rose from its foundations. The name over the entrance still reads Faith Hall.[10]

Bethune became very angry once when one of her students suffered as acute appendicitis attack. The local white hospital refused to administer aid to this sick young woman; after much begging and pleading she was admitted. When Bethune came back to visit the young lady she found her admitted to a corner in the rear kitchen area of the hospital. Right then and there she decided to established her own hospital on the school grounds, so no other young person would have to suffer such indignation. The hospital was staffed by white and black physicians and by the student nurses from Bethune College. The hospital served not only the student body but also Negroes throughout the state.

In 1923 Bethune College merged with Cookman Institute to become Bethune-Cookman College. At the time the College had a student body of 600, 32 faculty members, 14 modern buildings, a campus of 32 acres, and 1,800 graduates. Its property was valued at more than $800,000 free of debt.[11]

The 1994 statistics show that Bethune-Cookman College had 2,333 full-time students, 120 part-time students, 124 full-time professors and 60 part-time and a campus of 52 acres.[12] Bethune-Cookman has had only four presidents. The current President of the college is Dr. Oswald P. Bronson, Sr., a Bethune-Cookman graduate. In almost ninety-six years of existence Bethune-Cookman has had eight graduates who went on to become ordained ministers. Some of the college's alumni include, Dr. Henry Lyons, President of the National Baptist Convention; Bishop Richard Chappelli, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Patricia Mendez, International Opera Singer; Attorney Melody Sqire, Law Professor at Howard University; Coach Larry Little, former Miami Dolphins player and winner of two Super Bowls, and indicted into the Football Hall of Fame.[13]

Primarily an educator, Bethune is known for establishing a college, a hospital, and a better boys club. Through her efforts The American Red Cross decided to integrate its services and allow blacks to perform the same services as whites.

There was another side to this dynamic woman. Mrs. Bethune served as counselor, friend, and committee chair to several key figures and held several key posts in government. In 1928 President Calvin Coolidge invited her to participate in a White House conference on child welfare. In 1929 President Herbert Hoover

named Bethune to the National Commission for Child Welfare. 1935 President Franklin Deleno Roosevelt appointed her as director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration and special advisor on minority affairs. In 1945 Bethune was named special emissary for the State Department of the United Nations Conference. President Harry S. Truman appointed her to a federal committee that helped bring about full racial integration in the armed forces. Then later, in 1952 President Truman appointed her his personal representative at Liberia's inauguration ceremonies.[14]

Mary McLeod Bethune's leadership abilities impacted many spheres not the least of which was her achievements among and for black women.

> Every aspect of Bethune's philosophy of leadership came into play when she acted as advocate for Black women. She articulated her faith in them with a passion that no other Black woman leader has expressed since. She was adamant about the unheralded achievements of women, always encouraging them to go to the front and take our rightful place; fight our battles and claim our victories.[15]

In 1924 Bethune became President of the National Association of Colored Women, she also served that same year as Vice President of the National Council of Women. Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women in 1935 and was elected the first woman Vice President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1940.[16]

Bethune has many achievements to her credit. She was not only received by lords and ladies in London and Edinburgh, but also blessed by the Pope in Rome.[17] Bethune received numerous awards for her work, as well as several honorary degrees. She most appreciated the Spingarn Gold Medal, it represented the highest honor her own people could offer her. She also cherished the honorary degree of Doctor of Humanities from Rollins College, one of the oldest colleges for whites in the South.[18]

On May 18, 1955 just before her 80th birthday, Bethune died of a heart attack, leaving a rich legacy to all. She is buried on the campus she loved--Bethune-Cookman. Since her death, Bethune's work has been honored in notable ways. One of these is a statue in Lincoln Park, and the other is the Mary McLeod Bethune Museum and Archives, a National Historic Site designated by an act of Congress.[19] Mary Jane McLeod Bethune was indeed a woman of vision, excellence and faith.

ENDNOTES

[1]Dorothy M. Love, A Salute To Historic Black Women, (Chicago: Empak Enterprises, 1984), 4.

[2]Richard Rennert, ed., Shapers of America, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993), 14.

[3]Gerda Lerner, ed., Black Women in White America: A Documentary History, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 139.

[4]Ibid., 136.

[5]Rennert, Shapers of America, 14.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America, (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 15.

[9]Gerda Lerner, ed., Black Women in White America: A Documentary History (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 141.

[10]Ibid., 142.

[11]Ibid.

[12]American Universities and Colleges 14th ed., (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 365.

[13]I obtained this information from Pinky Oliver, Director of Alumni Affairs, Bethune-Cookman College.

[14]James Flynn, Negroes of Achievement in Modern America, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), 233.

[15]Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 244.

[16]Love, A Salute, 6.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Glennette T. Turner, Take a Walk in Their Shoes, (New York: Puffin Books, 1989), 144.

[19]Ibid.