



Perspectives

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On Women & Politics

Lydia Quarles, J.D., Senior Policy Analyst
John C. Stennis Institute of Government

Mary McLeod Bethune: *Full Equality in the Abundance of Life*

Reading about Dr. Dorothy L. Height in preparation for the last issue of Perspectives introduced me to Mary McLeod Bethune. An educator and civil rights activist in the very early days of the movement (she died in 1955), Mary McLeod Bethune was a mentor for Dr. Height as well as a friend and encouragement.

Mrs. Bethune was born to two former slaves in Mayesville, South Carolina, where her mother and father worked for their former owner, and her father farmed cotton on his own private field near the large house owned by their former owners, "The Homestead." Recognizing the precociousness of their 15th child, they sought for her an education, first at a local one-room schoolhouse in Mayesville, later at Scotia Seminary (now Barber-Scotia College) and Moody's Institute for Home and Foreign Missions (now Moody Bible College). Her dreams of becoming a missionary to Africa thwarted (black missionaries were unwanted in Africa, per the colonial powers of the day), she planned to teach but instead married Albertus Bethune and became a social worker in Savannah, Georgia. Shortly thereafter, she was convinced by a visiting Presbyterian Minister to move to Palatka, Florida to run a mission school. In 1898, she did so: running a mission school, working on prisoner outreach, and selling insurance to make ends meet. Albertus left the marriage without seeking a divorce; he died in 1918.

By the turn of the century, Mary McLeod Bethune was running the Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida, beginning the School in 1904 with 6 students. Seeking funds and sponsors, she asked various white benefactors to serve on the school's board, including James Gamble of Proctor & Gamble and Thomas White of White Sewing Machine Company. John D. Rockefeller made contributions to the school, as did Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. As a result of her industry, the curriculum of the school had a dual tract, industrial skills and liberal arts and sciences. The school continued to grow and in the early 20s merged with the Cookman Institute for Men, becoming the Bethune-Cookman School. She retired from the school in 1945 for health reasons.

Bethune entered the public arena in 1917, serving as the Florida Chapter president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW); her mission was to register as many black voters as possible in Florida. She also served as the president of the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs beginning in 1920. She resigned both of these jobs as she became the NACW national president in 1924 with the dream of having a professional association executive director and an organizational headquarters in Washington DC. The NACW became the first black-controlled organization represented in the capitol.

Just as her protégé Dr. Height, Mrs. Bethune was called upon by presidents to assist with policy and administration of programs. Both Presidents Coolidge and Hoover sought her advice on child welfare and health issues, as well as civil rights. While in Washington, she also lobbied for the inclusion of minorities in the National Youth Administration (NYA), a program formed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to promote relief and employment for young people aged 16-25. She became executive director of the NYA in 1936. Two years later, she was

appointed to the position of Director of the Division of Negro Affairs, becoming the first African-American female to head a federal agency.

During her work on the Washington scene, she became acquainted with President Franklin Roosevelt and his wife, Eleanor; they became fast friends. The president often described Bethune as Eleanor's "closest friend in her age group" This relationship gave her unprecedented access to the White House and first family, which she used to form a Federal Council on Negro Affairs, which came to be known as the Black Cabinet, which served the role of advisor to President Roosevelt on issues facing black citizens in America.

Just as her protégé, Mrs. Bethune received numerous awards for her achievements. She was awarded the Spingarn Medal in 1935. Ida Tarbell included her as number 10 on her list of America's greatest women. She was the only black woman present at the founding of the United Nations in San Diego, was the first woman to be given the Medal of Honor and Merit, Haiti's highest award. She also served as US emissary to Liberia, representing the nation at the induction of President William V. S. Tubman in 1949. Her contribution to black women was recognized when the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority bestowed on her an honorary membership.

Brown v. Board of Education, overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1954. In this year before her death, Mrs. Bethune defended the decision: "There can be no divided democracy, no class government, no half-free country, under our constitution. Therefore, there can be no discrimination, no segregation, no separation of some citizens from the rights which belong to all.... We are on our way. But these are frontiers which we must conquer... We must gain full equality in education... in the franchise... in economic opportunity, and full equality in the abundance of life.

Mary McLeod Bethune, "Chicago Defender" 1954

Streitmatter, Roger (2001). *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 123 ISBN 0-231-12249-7

On the event of her death May 18, 1955, the Washington Post wrote: "So great were her dynamism and force that it was almost impossible to resist her....Not only her own people, but all America has been enriched and ennobled by her courageous, ebullient spirit."

**If you would be interested in attending a seminar on "Applied Politics for Women",
please contact me at lydia@sig.msstate.edu.**

