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Women in History

Mary McLeod Bethune

Mark Giesler

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Mary McLeod Bethune is not a household name. This is perhaps fitting. Despite the fact that she made major contributions in politics and education, she epitomized the quiet, passionate African-American woman of the mid-20th century, “the mothers of the race, the homemakers and spiritual guides” (Hanson, 2003, p. 2).

Bethune was one of 17 children of former slave parents. As a girl, she attended Scotia Seminary, a Presbyterian school that emphasized religious and industrial education. This experience led her to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, where she dedicated her life to serving God through missionary work. Later she was told there was “no work for Negroes in the missions of Africa” (Skorapa, 1989).

She began a career educating African American children. Among her influences then was an apprenticeship with Lucy Craft Laney, who taught her that educated black women should uplift their families by providing “moral, Christian leadership at home and in their communities” (McCluskey, 1999, p. 5).

She lived by this example in her own home. In 1898 she married Albertus Bethune. In 1908 he returned to his home in South Carolina, leaving Bethune to raise their only son Albert. From this experience she received the inspiration to start a school, the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute. It began with five girls and her son. In 1929, it merged with the Cookman Institute to become coeducational and eventually was renamed Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune retired from the college as president emeritus in 1947 (Felder, 1996).

Her commitment to this venture accentuates her belief in racial integration. To fund the school, she relied on financial and moral support from the “rich, elite” white community (Skorapa, 1989). Her belief that only a racially segregated American could safeguard black rights alienated her from black politics of the time (McCluskey, 1999).

About the Author

Mark Giesler is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has worked as a researcher and instructor in higher education since 1990. He received his Masters in Theatre Education from the University of Northern Iowa in 1990 and a Masters in Social Work from the University of Nebraska-Omaha in 2002. He has served as program administrator of the Nebraska AIDS Project. He worked as a child/adolescent therapist in Omaha, Nebraska. Currently, he is a substance abuse counselor at LIGHThouse, Inc. in Plymouth, Michigan.

Yet, this stance best explains her ability to move easily into politics. She was an active member of the National Commission for Child Welfare under Presidents Coolidge and Hoover. She was also president of state, regional, and national women's clubs. By 1935, she was appointed director of the Office of Minority Affairs, the first federal office created for an African-American woman (Hanson, 2003). There were other firsts: in 1942, she assisted the Secretary of War on the selection of female officers for the Auxiliary Corps. Three years later she was named the only African American woman consultant to draw up the charter for the United Nations (McCluskey, 1999).

Bethune's legacy is steeped in contradiction. She personified notions of black and female achievement, which in her era, were at odds with each other. Eleanor Roosevelt (1940) said of her, "I have real admiration for Mrs. Bethune and her devotion to her race; as well as [for] her tact and wisdom." Mary McLeod Bethune was truly a woman of her time. She held fast to her core beliefs—religious faith, racial pride, and equal opportunity for all—and did so with the quiet, persistent courage that marks great achievement.

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