

# Opinions

## Mary McLeod Bethune the perfect definition of history, or 'her-story'

This is Women's History Month and in my dictionary the definition No. 4 defines history as "a past that is full of important events." Mary

### Dorothy's Word



By Dorothy Word

McLeod Bethune had a past that was full of important events, therefore, she and Women's History Month are a perfect fit for this definition.

One way to tell about Bethune's "important events" is to divide them into three sections: Bethune the Dreamer; Bethune the Multitask Woman; Bethune the "Contagious Believer." No doubt, her history (or "her-story") is well-known, nevertheless, it is worth repeating. Mary McLeod Bethune deserves to be in the spotlight along with the other outstanding, historic women.

First of all, Mary McLeod Bethune lived her life "crossing rivers," and she actually dreamed of rivers! Several times during her lifetime, while asleep she dreamed of deep, wide, swiftly-moving rivers that she had to cross. When she awoke, she understood that her dreams always meant that she would have tremendous challenges to face, huge problems to solve.

Born free in 1875 to parents who had been slaves, McLeod's life of "crossing rivers" from the cotton fields to the fields of education proved to be as "deep, wide and swiftly-moving" as the rivers she dreamed about. At age of nine, McLeod began her educational journey in Miss Wilson's one-room school in Mayesville, South Carolina.

Next, she attended Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina, for seven years. In 1893, she went to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Her heart's desire was to become a missionary to Africa. But, her heart was broken by the Mission Board informing her that African Americans were not allowed to be missionaries to Africa.

Bouncing back from that "deep, wide and swiftly-moving" disappointment, McLeod returned home to Mayesville to begin missionary

work in her own country. Within a few days, she was teaching in Miss Wilson's School, the very school where she began her education as an excited nine-year-old. After a year, McLeod moved on to teach at Haines Normal Institute in Augusta, Georgia; then at Kindrell Institute in Sumter, S. Carolina.

Mary McLeod became a multi-task woman when she married Albertus Bethune and in 1899, a son, Albert, was born. When Albert was nine-months-old, the Bethunes moved to Palatka, Fla., where Mrs. Bethune taught in a mission school. News reached her that African American children in Daytona, Fla., had no school to attend. She knew her next move would be to Daytona—to start a school of her own.

Mrs. Bethune was a natural-born, successful fundraiser. She knew she needed wealthy, generous people to help her start and maintain her school. Due to her excellent ability as a fundraiser, the rich and famous were willing to invest in Mrs. Bethune's "dream school." Contributors included: Oil magnate John D. Rockefeller; Industrialist Henry J. Kaiser; and James G. Gamble of Proctor & Gamble, to name a few.

In 1904, Mrs. Bethune opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial School for Negro Girls in a big, rundown house she fixed up as her home and for the school, on Oak Street. By 1905, there were 100 students and larger quarters were needed. So, in 1906, the school was moved from her house to Faith Hall.

Multi-task Bethune learned that African Americans were not being admitted to the local hospital. Her reaction and solution, in 1911, was to turn the small cottage next to Faith Hall into a two-bed hospital with African American Dr. T.A. Adams in charge. Later, it became a two-story, 26-bed hospital.

Even a multi-task woman has to "take a break" once in awhile. And, in one of her rare, private moments, Mary McLeod Bethune said this about herself:

*"I believe in God, so I believe in Mary Bethune."*

And, thousands of people believed in Mrs. Bethune too.

The Board of Education of the Methodist Episcopal Church believed in Mary Bethune to the extent that they merged their all-male Cookman Institute with her school to become Bethune-Cookman College. Wealthy white benefactors believed in Bethune serving as trustees of her school and leaving money in their wills on the school's behalf.

Numerous organizations believed in Bethune and honored her accordingly. Here are some of the awards she received. The Spingarn Award (1935); the Frances Drexel Award (1936); the Thomas Jefferson Medal (1942); Mother of the Century (1954). She was "listed as one of the 50 greatest women America has produced." (Ebony 1975). She was also called the First Lady of the Negro Race.

Two American Presidents—Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman—believed in Mary Bethune, assigning her to the following: Office of Minority Affairs; Special assistant to Secretary of War in selection of Negro officer candidates in Women's Army Corps (WAC); and as a consultant in the writing of the United Nations Charter.

Bethune believed in "giving back" and did so in her service to The Red Cross, The Urban League, the NAACP, the National Association of Colored Women, and the National Council of Negro Women, which she founded and served as its first president.

Possibly the most important group of people who believed in Mary Bethune was her son and her devoted students who lovingly bestowed on her the title, "Mother Dear." Bethune responded with her belief in them, in her Last Will and Testament. Her legacy reads:

*"I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you a thirst for education. I leave you respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity."*

In 1955, a heart attack ended the life of this woman who fervently believed "that by prayer and determination, even the most impossible dreams could become realities."