

Book Review:

The Life And Legacy Of Mary Mcleod Bethune

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*T*he story of Mary McLeod Bethune is a remarkable one in any era, but for a black woman to found a college in the segregated South in the early 1900's is almost beyond belief.

This book written by Nancy Long, an English professor at Bethune Cookman College, reveals that Dr. Bethune's life is almost like a fairy tale. The fifteenth of seventeen children born to ex-slaves in South Carolina, Mary acquired an education for herself and started an industrial school in Daytona Beach, Florida, which later became a four-year college. Dr. Bethune became an international figure, advisor to four presidents, director of Negro Affairs, administrator for the National Youth Administration, and founder of the National Council of Negro Women.

What makes this book so interesting is that the author shares the impressions of several different persons who knew Dr. Bethune personally. My grandparents, Laurence and Mary Eliza Thompson, who were early pioneers to Daytona, are mentioned in the book; my grandmother gave a set of dishes to Dr. Bethune and was active with the Palmetto Club which helped Dr. Bethune. My grandfather and father were on the Board of Trustees for the college, and my family has been staunch supporters of the school. My daughter has been an English professor at the school for sixteen years. I personally remember Dr. Bethune accompanying students in their white robes at Christmastime serenading families on the beachside.

This book is a pleasure to read because the author not only tells of Dr. Bethune starting the college with the help and support of well-to-do citizens such as the Gambles, Rockefellers, and Whites, but she also includes interviews of former students, faculty, and family. Dr. Long's book is an oral history which is easy to read and presents information not available in the few other books written about Dr. Bethune. Students who have read the book gave positive reactions.

One wrote: "I was impressed with how Dr. Bethune, a black woman, changed a big chunk of history with just \$1.50, five little girls, and faith in God."

Another wrote: "Dr. Bethune rose from nothing to become everything. She was friends with President Roosevelt, his wife, and many important people. No one would deny her access anywhere because she was black."

From the survey results, the students obviously learned a lot from this book about the history of the school and the obstacles its founder had to overcome. Dr. Bethune is certainly a role model whose achievements they can try to emulate.

So this is not just your "run-of-the-mill" biography. It is an intimate glimpse into the life of a national celebrity by those who knew her best. The reader learns about Mary the educator and political leader, but also Mary the mother and grandmother with personal problems and issues. Part of the charm of the book to me is that the subject comes across as a human being, not as a saint. This is an inspiring and real biography and a pleasure to read.

The book can be purchased by contacting Nancy Zrinyi Long at Longnz1@earthlink.net or 386-299-4974.

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