

Ms. Oseola McCarty: From Washerwoman to Philanthropist, a symbol of “Selfless Giving”

Oseola McCarty was a Washerwomen in Hattiesburg, Mississippi who became the University of Southern Mississippi’s (USM) most famous benefactor. She drew global attention at the age of 87 when in July 1995, she established a trust estimated at \$150,000 to provide scholarships to students in need. She stated that “I am giving it away so that the children won’t have to work so hard, like I did”. She had a 6th grade education, lived extremely frugal, received many awards including the Presidential Citizens Medal and several honorary degrees.

Ms. McCarty, an only child, was taught to save money by her Mother at an early age. In her 6th grade, her aunt became ill and needed care, so she stopped school to care for her. She then decided to become a washerwomen just like her grandmother. She opened her first savings account at First Mississippi National Bank and other banks over the years including Trademark Bank. Ms. Never owned a car: she walked everywhere she went, pushing a cart nearly a mile to get groceries. Friends gave her a ride to Friendship Baptist Church where she was a dedicated member. She owned a black and white TV and lived in a house given by her uncle, until her death.

Over the years, Trustmark Bank noticed Ms. McCarty’ accumulated savings and began to assist her in future estate planning. She later signed an irrevocable trust, allowing the bank to manage her funds from which she received a regular check. With the assistance of a local attorney for whom she had done laundry, and the bank trust officer, using slips of paper and dimes to represent 10% shares, Ms. McCarty set out the future distribution of her estate. She set aside a dime (10% for the church, one dime (10%) each for three relative and the remaining dimes (60%) for Southern Mississippi. Her instructions were that the funds should be used for students, preferably those of African American descent, who could not otherwise attend due to financial hardship. When her plans were made public, local leaders immediately funded an endowment in her honor.

At the age of 87, during the summer of 1995, she began to anticipate her death and decided to give away most of her life savings, saying there was nothing in particular she wanted to buy and no place in particular she wanted to go. She lived a solitary existence, surrounded by rows of clothes she made pretty for people who knew her only as the washerwoman. She gave away a life savings of \$150,000 to help complete strangers get a college and education.

Miss McCarty was told that she had liver cancer in August 1998, about a year after she underwent surgery for colon cancer. She wanted her last days to be spent in the little house where she spent most of her life. "I don't want to close my eyes because I don't know if I'll open them again," the tiny, frail woman told a visitor. "But I am not afraid."

She did not want any monuments, any proclamations, said people who knew her. But the selflessness of her gift would bring her worldwide attention. The woman who had gone out only for some preaching at the Friendship Baptist Church in Hattiesburg and to buy groceries

would be honored by the United Nations, would shake hands with President Clinton and would receive more than 300 awards. People all over the world knew who she was and what she did.

The woman who acted in anticipation of death found a life she could have never imagined. She flew on a plane for the first time in her life and laughed out loud when the food did not fall off the tray as the plane rumbled through the sky. She stayed in a hotel for the first time in her life, and before she checked out, she made the bed.

"People treated her like a monument," said Jewel Tucker, the secretary to the president of the university and Miss McCarty's traveling companion in those almost giddy years after the gift. "But she was really a movement. It will keep moving." Contributions from more than 600 donors have added some \$330,000 to the original scholarship fund of \$150,000. After hearing of Miss McCarty's gift, Ted Turner, a multibillionaire, gave away a billion dollars.

"He said, 'If that little woman can give away everything she has, then I can give a billion,' " Ms. Tucker said.

If anyone can say they felt adoration in their life, Ms. Tucker said, Miss McCarty could. People would see her in airports and flock to her. Some people just wanted to touch her, as though she was good luck.

Awards

Along with all the plaques and trophies or other honors -- she received the Presidential Citizen's Medal, the nation's second-highest civilian award, and an honorary doctorate from Harvard University -- she was awarded other things that were pure fun.

In 1996, she carried the Olympic torch through part of Mississippi. Later that year, hers was the hand on the switch that dropped the ball in Times Square in New York's New Year's Eve celebration. In fact, she said at the time, it was the first time she had stayed up past midnight.

Ms. McCarty outlived her relatives. She died September 28, 1999 in the frame house where she took in laundry and ironing and made her small fortune a dollar or two at a time. Miss McCarty laid in state in the rotunda of the University of Southern Mississippi's main building. She was 91.

Friends like Aubrey K. Lucas, president emeritus of the University said it warmed him and others that came into contact with her to know that a lifetime of loneliness had been pushed aside by all the positive attention that her gift brought. Horace Fleming, the university's president, said he sometimes wondered if all the attention that came her way was really welcome. But he believes now that it was.

Her traveling companion, Ms. Tucker, knows that Miss McCarty did enjoy it. Although she never asked for it, "She loved every minute of it," Ms. Tucker said.