

# Head, Heart, Hand:

## Mary McLeod Bethune and Bethune-Cookman College 1904-2004

By Jeannette F. Ford

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) is one of the most influential women to have lived in Central Florida. In recent years, Bethune-Cookman College students have celebrated this remarkable Central Florida hero in the History Department's Centennial Oral History Project.<sup>1</sup>

A little over one hundred years ago Mary McLeod Bethune came to Volusia County. She had traveled from Lee County, South Carolina, to Palatka, Florida, where she briefly taught the children of turpentine workers. In 1904 Bethune opened the Daytona Industrial Institute for Training Negro Girls and changed the dumpsite known as "hell's hole" into a haven for progress.<sup>2</sup>

Bethune explained the school's humble beginnings: "I had no furniture. I begged dry goods boxes

and made benches and stools; begged a basin and other things I needed and in 1904 five little girls here started school."<sup>3</sup> President Oswald Perry Bronson, Sr., met the school's founder in the 1930s. "This

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campus was the only place where people of color, whites, and other races would come together," he said, adding that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt "insisted on staying in Mrs. Bethune's home" when visiting Daytona Beach.<sup>4</sup>

Former City Councilman Bernard Smith was born in the segregated hospital on campus that now serves as the General Studies building. "When Bethune-Cookman

students went to downtown Daytona Beach, they had to wear blue and white. Mrs. Bethune did that for one particular reason, so that people who owned the stores knew to respect you as college students." He remembered, "There was a Woolworth's downtown, the water fountains there were 'White' and 'Colored' water. Of course we always used to drink the white water. We were getting to be very rebellious because we really didn't care anymore about what people thought. Here in Daytona we didn't have a whole lot of Civil Rights issues as other cities did because Dr. Bethune's influence was here. What a lot of people in other cities were fighting to get we already had in the early '40s and '50s, like black policemen and black bus drivers."<sup>5</sup>

Her recognized influence is reflected in the recollections of



*Hamilton Holt,  
President,  
Rollins College  
and Mary  
McLeod  
Bethune,  
Courtesy of  
Orange County  
Regional  
History Center*



*White Hall, Photo Courtesy B-CC Archive Home Page Gallery*

associate athletic director, Jack “Cy” McClairen, who said, “Coming here in 1949 meant that I got a chance to see black bus drivers. In my hometown, Panama City, and throughout the state they didn’t have black guys driving the bus or any black policemen. Daytona had black policemen with uniforms, the whole nine yards. I had thought I was in heaven, because they would protect our neighborhoods.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1923 Bethune’s school merged with the Cookman Institute, a school for boys in Jacksonville. Today, Bethune-Cookman College students are discovering through oral histories how the force of Bethune’s personality and character blazed a path for education and human rights. Bethune was the powerbroker on the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, President Franklin Roosevelt’s “black cabinet.” She led the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and directed the National Youth Administration’s Office of Negro Affairs. Bethune organized a 1937 conference held by the Department of Labor on the Problems of Negro and Negro Youth, at which Eleanor Roosevelt delivered a key speech. The meeting outlined a blueprint for the Civil Rights Movement. In Daytona Beach, “Ms. Bethune was the mother of the community, a giant to me,” said Mary Jo Drayton, B-CC Student Support Services, who grew up across the street from Bethune. “She often

said, ‘To thine own self be true’ at a time,” Drayton remarked, “when Church and community intertwined with Bethune-Cookman College.”<sup>7</sup>

Mary Alice Smith, alumna, professor, and poet at B-CC during the tenure of all of the college’s presidents, participated in mandatory Sunday community meetings. A procession of blue-and-white clad B-CC students entering the chapel mingled with white tourists to hear speakers and the choir. Bethune’s pragmatic approach to fund-raising emulated the example of Booker T. Washington in courting white philanthropy.



*Eleanor Roosevelt visits with Mary McLeod Bethune, Photo Courtesy of the Florida State Archives*

Cleo Higgins, former academic dean who created the “Head, Heart, Hand” symbol based on Bethune’s motto, related, “Whenever Ms. Bethune came back to campus from her travels word always got around ‘Ms. Bethune is back’ and we knew there would be an assembly. When she entered the lobby of Heyn Chapel everybody, EVERYBODY, stood up as she walked down the aisle. Nobody said a word; there was no murmuring, no scratching,

no sighing. We would be seated when she bowed her head. Mrs. Bethune was a no-nonsense person. There were no acts put on in her presence.”<sup>8</sup>

Loretta Wright, a longtime friend of Bethune’s said, “Her voice was soothing and she was an eloquent speaker; she had you spellbound.”<sup>9</sup> Mary Alice Smith, a collector of precious “gems” recalled those words of wisdom offered spontaneously by those in attendance at community meetings: “‘To every man there is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us that it does not behoove any of us to talk about the rest of us.’ ‘If you can change something, do. If not, abide by it.’ We were taught to make the most of everything. Bethune was a very warm and caring person and her favorite statement was, ‘I just want to educate my black boys and girls.’”<sup>10</sup>

Marian Speight, retired professor, noted Bethune was always elegantly dressed. “She never was underdressed when she would go to town. Every time she was in her office she looked like she was going to talk to the president. She always looked beautiful. Kitty Pope, from a Seabreeze Avenue dress shop, would come down and, bring her clothes.” Speight said, “We were living at Ranslow Hall and sometimes early in the morning she’d call us over there seeing if a certain dress looked right.”<sup>11</sup>

Senorita Locklear, personal secretary for Bethune, said that if the founder visited the campus today, “I can see her with that smile looking around and exclaiming, ‘Oh see what God hath wrought.’ She would just be so proud.” Locklear continued, “We hear about her as a political activist, as a renowned speaker; we know about her as standing up for Civil Rights work and all that. But she was a family woman; you very seldom hear

anything about that. She loved her family.<sup>11</sup>

"Mrs. Bethune told me this," confided Locklear. "Once there was someone speaking in Orlando at the civic auditorium and she wanted to hear that person, so she got her chauffeur up to drive her over. When she walked into the auditorium a sign said 'Negroes in the back, and Whites in the front.' She could strut, and she said, 'I walked in and I strutted with my cane. I sat in the second row.' She was just sitting there and she felt someone tap her. She looked up to a white usher who told her, 'This section is reserved for whites.' She said, 'I looked up at him and said, "I know, I can read," and I quietly turned back around and waited. I did not move and he did not come back. I don't know whether anyone told him who I was, but nobody else said anything to me."<sup>13</sup>

President Bronson related a similar story. "Dr. Bethune was on the elevator in the White House and the elevator operator said, 'I can't take you up.' Dr. Bethune said, 'That's okay, darling. I will take you up!' This was at a time when there where no schools for people of color in this area."<sup>14</sup> Bronson clearly recalls the moment in his youth when Mrs. Bethune said that he would be a great man one day. B-CC alumnus and professor emeritus Jake Miller exhorted today's students to "read and have some type of focus. Know where you are going and don't expect everyone to help. We are not just citizens of a small place; we are citizens of the world."<sup>15</sup> Loretta Wright warned, "Those who fail to plan, plan to fail. If you don't set goals for yourself you'll be out there floundering." Wright continued, "Have an entrepreneur's

determination in school and set your own path. Stay focused and do not allow anyone to do things that will hinder you from accomplishing your goals." Wright emphatically reminded students: "All over campus one can grasp the Bethune messages 'Head, Heart, Hand,' and 'Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve.'<sup>16</sup>

"It's just so nice to know that students are interested in history," Wright said, "and of course the thing I regret most in my life is that I never saw the need to record things my father and grandmother told me. You think you live forever

**"Stay focused and do not allow anyone to do things that will hinder you from accomplishing your goals."**

and that you are going to have this memory forever. What you students are doing is commendable," said Wright.<sup>17</sup> Freddie Harris, secretary of the School of Social Sciences, said Bethune chose the Twenty-third Psalm and the song "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" to represent the strength of her school. "Ms. Bethune was a real role model. She wasn't a very pretty woman on the outside, but she was just beautiful on the inside."<sup>18</sup>

The real challenge for today's students comes from Bernard Smith, who explained, "Our whole goal in life was to be better than the generation before us. And that is the one thing I tell my children—how you all might be the only generation not to exceed your parents. That is something you might want to take a look at. That's a serious issue."<sup>19</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bethune-Cookman College students enrolled in HI 253 Oral History and HI 337 Topics in History courses in fall and spring 2002, respectively, researched, conducted, and transcribed interviews for the Centennial Oral History Project. The students are: Dezeki Humphrey, Kevey Shelton, Turkessa Wright, Gregory Heyward, Debra Brown, Donna Brown, Wayman Graham, LaQundra Glover, Seth Jerue, Aman Tabrard, Allen Knox, Sharquia Pinson, Dresdin Boglin, Ottoine Wright, Paul Oyot, and Rashad Muhammed. Group interviews took place in the School of Social Sciences on the Daytona Beach campus.

<sup>2</sup>Sheila Flemming, Bethune-Cookman College 1904-1994: The Answered Prayer to a Dream. Bethune-Cookman College Bookstore, 1995, p.24.

<sup>3</sup>Mary McLeod Bethune, interview by Daniel Mortimer Williams (1890-1969), field notes, Daytona Beach, FL, summer 1946.

<sup>4</sup>Oswald Perry Bronson, Sr., Ph.D., interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, November 26, 2002. This and other cited interviews were conducted by students in the HI 253 Oral History classes taught by Jeannette Ford at Bethune-Cookman College. Slight and nonsubstantive changes have been made to some of these quotations by the author to clarify meaning.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard Smith, interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 1, 2002.

<sup>6</sup>Jack "Cy" McClairen, interview by HI 337 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, April 21, 2003.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Jo Drayton, interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 17, 2002.

<sup>8</sup>Cleo Higgins, Ph.D., interview by Debra Brown and James Clowse, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, April 23, 2003.

<sup>9</sup>Loretta Wright, interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, December 12, 2002.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Alice Smith, Ph.D., interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, November 11, 2002.

<sup>11</sup>Marion Speight, Ph.D., interview by Dr. Winifred Johnson, Seth Jerue and Dezeki Humphrey, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 31, 2002.

<sup>12</sup>Senorita Locklear, interview by Dr. Jeannette Ford, Seth Jerue, Dezeki Humphrey, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 18, 2002.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Oswald Perry Bronson, Sr., interview.

<sup>15</sup>Jake Miller, Ph.D., interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 15, 2002.

<sup>16</sup>Loretta Wright, interview.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Freddie Harris, interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 24, 2002.

<sup>19</sup>Bernard Smith, interview.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Jeannette F. Ford bails from Endicott, New York and is the author of Mao's Prey: The History of Chen Renbing, Liberal Intellectual. Her specialties are Asian Studies and Oral History. She came to Bethune-Cookman College three years ago to help globalize the curriculum. Her interest in the history of Bethune-Cookman College is fueled by interactions with those individuals who knew and were influenced by Mary McLeod Bethune. "B-CC students want everyone to know how a determined African-American woman became a success. She not only built the school we love, but led the struggle for Civil Rights and unity."*

