

## Wisdom from a Washerwoman

Oseola McCarty was a local washerwoman in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who became the most famous benefactor of the University of Southern Mississippi.

She drew global attention after it was announced in July 1995 that she had established a trust through which at her death a portion of her life's savings would be left to the university to provide scholarships for deserving African-American students in need of financial assistance. The amount was estimated at \$150,000 – a surprising amount given her low-paid occupation.

Here is more about her amazing story, gleaned from information in *Philanthropy Roundtable* and *Wikipedia*.

McCarty was born in 1908, conceived when her mother was raped on a wooded path in rural Mississippi as she returned from tending to a sick relative. She was raised in Hattiesburg by her grandmother and aunt, who cleaned houses, cooked and took in laundry.



As a child, Oseola would come home from elementary school and iron clothes, stashing the money she earned in her doll buggy. The three women relied completely on each other, and when the aunt returned from a hospitalization unable to walk, Oseola dropped out of sixth grade to care for her, and to take up her work as a washerwoman. She never returned to school.

“Work became the great good of her life,” explained one person who knew her. “She found beauty in its movement and pride in its provisions. She was happy to have it and gave herself over to it with abandon.”

McCarty herself put it this way: “I knew there were people who didn’t have to work as hard as I did, but it didn’t make me feel sad. I loved to work, and when you love to do anything, those things don’t bother you. Sometimes I worked straight through two or three days. I had goals I was working toward. That motivated me, and I was able to push hard. Work is a blessing. As long as I am living, I want to be working at something. Just because I am old doesn’t mean I can’t work.”

McCarty scrubbed her laundry by hand on a rubboard. She did try an automatic washer and dryer in the 1960s, but found that “the washing machine didn’t rinse enough, and the dryer turned the whites yellow.” After years of boiling clothes and then doing four fresh-water rinses, that wasn’t good enough to meet her high standards. The machine was almost immediately retired, and she went back to her Maid Rite scrubboard, water drawn from a nearby fire hydrant, and 100 feet of open-air clothesline.

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Asked to describe her typical day, McCarty answered:

“I would go outside and start a fire under my wash pot. Then I would soak, wash and boil a bundle of clothes. Then I would rub 'em, wrench 'em, starch 'em and hang 'em on the line. After I had all of the clean clothes on the line, I would start on the next batch. I'd wash all day, and in the evenin' I'd iron until 11 o'clock. I loved the work. The bright fire. Wrenching the wet, clean cloth. White shirts shinin' on the line.”

Hard work “gives your life meaning,” she said. “Everyone needs to work hard at something to feel good about themselves. Every job can be done well, and every day has its satisfactions. If you want to feel proud of yourself, you've got to do things you can be proud of.”



McCarty began to save almost as soon as she started working at age 8. As the money pooled up in her doll buggy, the very young girl took action. “I went to the bank and deposited. Didn't know how to do it. Went there myself. Didn't tell Mama and them I was goin'. I commenced to save money. I never would take any of it out. I just put it in. It's not the ones that make the big money, but the ones who know how to save who get ahead. You got to leave it alone long enough for it to increase.”

What are some lessons to be derived from McCarty's life and work? Several, including ...

1. Hard work pays off – not just in financial terms but in mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions – and gives life meaning.
2. Excellence in work, whatever that career may be, is much admired and appreciated.
3. Giving brings a remarkable sense of satisfaction.
4. Character and good habits make life worth living.
5. Faith in God is vital. “I start each day on my knees,” she said. Then I get busy about my work. You have to accept God the best way you know how, and then He'll show Himself to you. And the more you serve Him, the more able you are to serve Him.”

McCarty knew she didn't have to save the whole world. She cast her buckets down and fixed what was at hand. “I can't do everything. But I can do something to help somebody. And what I can do, I will do.”

Her life and her philosophy inspire us – whatever our jobs in Life Care and Century Park may be – in the unique calling we have.

*In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He Himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35 ESV).*

– Beecher Hunter