

# The Amazing Grace Of Miss McCarty

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PHOTOGRAPHY ALLEN ROKACH



*The world grows richer because of the immeasurable gift bestowed by a tiny, elderly washerwoman in Mississippi.*

The rhythm of inspiration beat strongly, like the fluttering of angel wings, in 8-year-old Oseola McCarty's hands. She toiled after school with her mother, grandmother, and aunt, immaculately cleaning clothes brought to their modest Hattiesburg, Mississippi, home.

After her aunt became ill, 12-year-old Oseola quit school to help the family full time. In subsequent years, she nursed all three women until their deaths. For the lone woman left behind, the simple, familiar act of laundering became a comforting ritual. The boiling water in the cast-iron pot, the strum of the rub board's song, the gentle sway of the drying line, and the crisp reward of the starchily ironed apparel filled her life with meaningful motion.

For more than 70 years—until arthritis forced her to quit in 1995—the washerwoman worked. She lived a prayerful, frugal life of solitude, never marrying, never even learning how to drive a car. Once a week, she walked to several local banks, where she faithfully deposited a few dollars.

Then the aging laundress committed an act of grace so amazing it convinced even the jaded that saints do exist. In an irrevocable trust, she assigned the bulk of her savings to the University of Southern Mississippi. Upon her death, her gift of approximately \$150,000 will be used for scholarships to aid needy students. A campaign since has raised over \$350,000 beyond the \$150,000, and four students have received Oseola McCarty scholarships.

"Grownups can do for themselves," says Miss McCarty, as she sits in a worn rocker in the living room of her neat-as-a-pin home. She turns 90 next month. "I wanted to give this gift to the

children." Sounds of traffic filter in through a screened door, while a new air conditioner sits unused, though she politely offers to turn it on for visitors. She bought a washing machine too, "But it didn't rinse [the clothes] enough for me."

On her dining room table rests the latest letters and awards, or "rewards" as she calls them, from admirers. "I didn't have the least idea how it would spread," says Miss McCarty. With quiet dignity and joy she's embraced the overwhelming crush of interview requests and accolades that keep her on the road and in the limelight.

Barbara Walters named her one of the top 10 fascinating people of 1995. David Letterman hosted her on *The Late Show*. Oprah Winfrey invited the Mississippian to appear on her talk show. Numerous magazines and newspapers have written about her. ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, MTV, NPR, and the BBC have featured segments on her.

The world, it seems, delights in this soft-spoken woman. And she delights in finally venturing out into it. Before her gift, she had never even visited the nearby university. The first time she did, faculty and staff gave her a standing ovation.

The unlikely philanthropist received the Presidential Citizens Medal shortly after the gift's announcement. "[The President] was going to fly a private plane for me to come to Washington," says Miss McCarty. "I said, 'No way! If I can't go on a train, I ain't going.' They put an extra car on that train just for me." Increasing demand for her appearance has since changed her mind about flying.

She's also received the Wallenberg



Humanitarian Award, the Avicenna Medal from UNESCO, and countless others. Harvard University gave her an honorary doctorate and Memphis' Baptist Memorial Hospital made her an honorary nurse, the profession she wanted to enter.

She carried the Olympic torch (with aid from two motorized police officers) and dropped the New Year's ball at Times Square. ("Confetti and balloons were everywhere. Somebody was going to have to clean that up," she tsks.) She smiles at the mention of a framed letter from President Clinton, but she positively glows while showing off a school banner proclaiming her "Honorary Grandmother."

"I have the stereotype that if you've only lived in one place and had a relatively limited experience, that makes you something of a simpleton," admits Paul Laughlin of Trustmark National Bank in Hattiesburg, the trustee of Miss McCarty's estate. "She comes up with these observations that illustrate she is clearly not a simpleton." Her book, *Simple Wisdom for Rich Living*, by Longstreet Press in Atlanta, abounds with such insights. "I think the way we live matters, not just for now but for always," she writes. "There is an eternal side to everything you do."

On this day, Paul has just returned from driving Miss McCarty home after a bank visit from the elderly lady. Arthritis has cut back on her local walking treks, if not her jet-setting. While at her home, Paul noted a floor problem and a need for plastic screening on her front porch.

"As the trustee, we are responsible for taking care of Miss McCarty—and I will," he says. "We're going to take care of her to the extent that she wants.

She's never said, 'Now that I'm famous, I ought to move out of this little house.' Her house is sufficient for her needs." He jokes, "Last year, she became exorbitant and paid to have a little sidewalk connecting her porch to the street."

Although she's comfortable with everyone, says Paul, "The fact that she's had such an insular, sheltered life means that celebrity does not mean anything to her." On the drive home, Miss McCarty mentioned that she had been in Atlanta that week to meet "that real tall man. He talks real loud, he gave a billion dollars for underprivileged children, and he said that he and I were the two heroes."

"I said, 'You mean Ted Turner?'" Paul recalls.

In fact, Turner has credited the laundress in part for his own recent altruism. "I admire Oseola McCarty," says the media mogul, who did indeed give a billion dollars to the United Nations. "She gave away her entire life savings. She did more than I did. I just gave away one third—I've still got about \$2 billion left. She's the one who really deserves the credit."

"She's forced at least a few people to reassess their priorities," says Paul admiringly. "I mean Ted Turner! If Ted Turner can recognize that the little lady in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who has done laundry all her life, can do something as significant as Ted Turner can do, that's quite an important message."

As for Miss McCarty, she smiles, then lifts her clasped hands up, up, up,

opening them like angel wings. "This is how far I'd like my gift to spread," she says as she smiles. "People have given more than I have already."

No, Miss McCarty, they haven't. ◇



There's a lot of talk about self-esteem these days. It seems pretty basic to me. If you want to feel proud of yourself, you've got to do things you can be proud of. Feelings follow actions.

*Oseola McCarty*

