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Statue of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune for US Capitol

BY: Nancy Turner

On July 10, 2021, in Pietrasanta, Italy a group of sculptors, representatives of Bethune-Cookman University and Daytona Beach, Florida, local Italian dignitaries, US Congressional representative, and friends/family of the Master Sculptor, Nilda Comas, gathered to celebrate the birthday of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune and to bless the marble sculpture that will move next year to its permanent home in the U.S. Capitol Statuary Hall. Dr. Bethune's statue will be the first African American woman in Statuary Hall. The history of the statue had begun years before. Let me share some of that history which includes 1) a brief review of Dr. Bethune's life, 2) the legislative action that established the creation of the statue for the State of Florida, and 3) the fundraising to support the project. The history is paraphrased here from the printed programs for the day's celebrations, "The Blessing of the Statue of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune" and "The Evening Program Honoring Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, America's Black Rose" prepared by the Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Statuary Fund, Inc. and from a June 8, 2020, presentation titled: "Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Statuary Project"

"Mary McLeod was born in South Carolina on July 10, 1875 to a family of seventeen children. Her remarkable journey and rise from humble beginnings started with education. She attended Trinity Presbyterian Mission School at the age of 10 and learned to read. Later she went to Scotia Seminary in North Carolina and Moody Bible Institute in Chicago with the goal of becoming a missionary. When there were no openings available to her, she became a teacher. In South Carolina she married Albertus Bethune. The dream of opening her own school led her to Palatka and then to Daytona Beach in Florida where she started the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro girls with 5 young students. That school eventually became Bethune-Cookman University, one of America's oldest historically black universities.

"While working on the development of her school she became a national leader in racial and gender equality and was advisor to five US Presidents, most notably Franklin Delano Roosevelt and she was a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. She was president of the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs as well as the prestigious National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and founded the National Council of Negro Women. Even with her work in "high" levels of government, she was said to have been readily accessible to average men and women and the college students that she mentored.

Statuary Hall Collection as a replacement for the statue of General Edmund Kirby Smith. Governor Rick Scott signed the bill into law on March 10, 2016. After public input, an ad hoc committee of the Great Floridians Program recommended Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune and Senate Bill 472 was enacted during the 2018 Florida Legislative Session to approve the replacement of General Smith and the selection of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. This law was signed into effect by Governor Scott on March 19, 2018. The statue of Kirby Smith will be moved to the Lake County Historical Museum.

"Nilda Comas, Master Sculptor, was chosen from 1,600 artists across the US and commissioned by the state of Florida to create this sculpture. She was born and raised in San Juan Puerto Rico and will be the first Hispanic woman to sculpt a statue for the US Capitol National Statuary Hall. Nilda's homes and studios are in Ft. Lauderdale and in Pietrasanta, Italy where she has access to beautiful marble. She spent considerable time after her selection researching the life and legacy of Dr. Bethune so that she could adequately capture her essence in stone. The Carrara marble selected for the sculpture was taken from the quarry of Michelangelo and was sculpted in the Franco Cervietti Studio.



photos courtesy of Danny Zarifian

The maquette (model) of the statue in clay at the Franco Cervietti Studio in September 2019. Nilda Comas, Master Sculptor is on the right.



photos courtesy of Danny Zarifian

The marble from the quarry of Michelangelo acquired for the sculpture, photo taken on September 2019 trip.

The funds for the project were privately raised by a Florida not-for-profit corporation established in 2018, the “Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune Statuary Fund, Inc.” A Board of Directors, led by Nancy Lohman serving as President was selected with the sole purpose of raising funds for the design, creation, and

installation of a marble statue of Dr. Bethune to be displayed in Statuary Hall. After the organization’s formation, the Board expanded its goals twice. First, to commission a bronze statue to be placed in the Daytona Beach Riverfront Esplanade, facing the university; and second, to provide educational opportunities for both students and the public through the creation of a feature-length documentary and a K-12 curriculum module to share the artistic statuary process and provide an opportunity to learn about the legacy of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune.”

Now that you have this history, let’s go back to July 10, 2021--the celebration began at noon in the courtyard of the Pietrasanta City Hall when local Italian dignitaries, Bethune-Cookman University and Daytona Beach dignitaries, and US House of Representatives member Kathy Castor of Tampa unveiled the marble statue of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune.





Later in the afternoon, all the attendees were taken by bus to a park in Pietrasanta where the bronze version of the statue has been placed for the summer. It will be permanently moved to Daytona Beach after that

Finally, in the evening, a program honoring Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune through music and the symbolism of the statue was held at the Cervietti Studio. Jacari W. Harris, a native of Tallahassee and 2018 graduate of BCU served as Master of Ceremonies. Musical performances were by BCU graduates Khalil Bradley, Hannah Randolph, and Sarah Slaughter as well as an A Cappella choral group, "Coro Versilia a Capezzano Monte". This Italian choir, founded in 1974, are a group of friends passionate about the mountains and songs. They have held concerts in various Italian regions as well as abroad.

In between the musical interludes, the life and legacy of Dr. Bethune was presented by Dr. Hiram Powell, interim President of Bethune-Cookman and members of the Board of Directors of the Statuary Fund, Johnny McCray, Jr., the BCU National Alumni Association President, Derrick Henry, the Mayor of Daytona Beach, and Nancy Lohman, President of the Statuary Fund. The presentations described Dr. Bethune in her role as a civil rights trailblazer, through her work at the United Nations, and in the words of her last will and testament. In summary she dictated her last will and testament on April 14, 1955; she died on May 18, 1955. It stated:

“I leave you love; I leave you hope; I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another; I leave you a thirst for education; I leave you respect for the uses of power; I leave you faith; I leave you racial dignity; I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men; I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people.”
(Evening program, page 20)

Let me tell you, in closing, about three features of the statue: 1) An intricately carved cane in her right hand was a gift from President Franklin D. Roosevelt; 2) the stack of books behind her provide balance

for the weight of the statue and have special inscriptions from her last will and testament; and finally, 3) the black rose in her left hand has a story of its own. In her international travels, Dr. Bethune discovered a black rose in a garden in Switzerland for the first time. She was smitten by its beauty. After that experience, she referred to her students at BCU as her “Black Roses”. As described in the blessing ceremony, “she often used the example of the flower garden to illustrate equality. Flowers are many colors, but they grow together in harmony in the garden.” (Evening program, page 3, and Garden of Praise)

