General Information

Source: NBC Today Show  
Creator: Bryant Gumbel  
Resource Type: Video News Report  
Copyright: NBCUniversal Media, LLC.  
Copyright Date: 1985  
Event Date: 03/05/1985  
Air/Publish Date: 03/05/1985  
Clip Length 00:04:06

Description

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Keywords

Mary McLeod Bethune, Commemorative Stamp, Recognition, Black Heritage, Black Cabinet, National Council of Negro Women, Women's Movement, African American, Race Relations, Civil Rights, Minority, Equality, Franklin D. Roosevelt, FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt, National Youth Administration, Bethune-Cookman College, President Ronald Reagan, Dr. Dorothy Height

Citation

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https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=1230

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Transcript

Unveiling of a Stamp Honoring Mary McLeod Bethune

BRYANT GUMBEL: She was advisor to four presidents, she was a founder of a college, and she was a founder of one of the largest national organizations of women, yet few Americans have heard of Mary McLeod Bethune. That may all change later today when Mrs. Bethune is honored with a new 22-cent stamp that bears her picture. She was born of slave parents, she was a close friend and confidant to President and Mrs. Roosevelt, she was the only woman on Roosevelt’s unofficial black cabinet during the ‘30s. With five dollars and a lot of faith, Mrs. Bethune started a university in Daytona Beach, Florida. Today, Bethune-Cookman College is one of the most successful black institutions, graduating 300 men and women each year. And 50 years ago, Mrs. Bethune started the National Council of Negro Women, an organization which has reached out to millions of women through hundreds of programs, including employment training and aide to single and teenaged mothers. Dr. Dorothy Height worked closely with Mrs. Bethune, and she took over the reigns of that organization in 1957, and she joins us this morning. Good morning Dr. Height.

Dr. DOROTHY HEIGHT: Good morning Bryant.

GUMBEL: Despite all of Mary McLeod Bethune’s accomplishments, few know her name. Why?

Dr. HEIGHT: Well I think that during women’s history week, it is well to remind ourselves that many women have accomplished a great deal and their contributions are not known. But that’s especially true of black women. Often their contributions have gone unrecognized, despite the fact that Mrs. Bethune was the only black woman ever to have founded a four-year accredited college, despite the fact that she founded the National Council of Negro Women, despite the fact that she was known all over the world, there are still too few who know of her work, because I think this is characteristic of our lack of understanding of black contributions.

GUMBEL: You have been lobbying hard to get her the recognition she so richly deserves. How tough a
fight has it been?
Dr. HEIGHT: Well, it has not been easy in one sense because it took a long time, but the great thing has
been that there’s been a real mobilization about it and I think it took a while to get to some understanding
and appreciation of the importance of Mrs. Bethune. Now that there’s been a black heritage series, that
opportunity seemed to have been making it a little easier, but I have to say millions across this country
have wanted this for more than a quarter century.
BRYANT GUMBEL: Do you find it odd or ironic to have her honored now in the administration of a
president who many blacks think insensitive to their plight?
Dr. HEIGHT: Well I have to say that, that the response of Dr., President Reagan to the legislation that we
had to honor Mrs. Bethune and have her residence made a historic site as well as this step, came with a
great deal of support in both parts of the parties and in all parts of the Congress, and I think we feel that
this has been a positive step that we have to be appreciative of.
GUMBEL, Mrs. Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt enjoyed a very special relationship…
Dr. HEIGHT: Yes.
GUMBEL: …at a time when, frankly, such things weren’t normally done. How did it develop so well?
Dr. HEIGHT: Well, President Roosevelt had brought Mrs. Bethune to Washington to be an advisor in his
national youth administration, and during that period, she and Mrs. Roosevelt became very good friends,
such good friends that they could talk honestly with each other, and also Mrs. Bethune was astute enough
to learn how to use that relationship to advance not herself, but her people.
BRYANT GUMBEL: You, do you yet see any blacks out there with that kind of access that she enjoyed?
Dr. HEIGHT: Well, it is, it is not a common thing, and I think one of the reasons that she is the only black
American and the first black American of women of any race, to be honored in a public park in our
nation’s capitol is because Mrs. Bethune had a very unique quality. She worked with people at, in all
levels, and all races, all groups, but she never lost sight of her goal.
BRYANT GUMBEL: A most unusual woman, Mary McCloud Bethune. Dr. Dorothy Height, thank you
for joining us.
Dr. HEIGHT: Thank you Bryant.