

What Dr. Bethune Left Us and What Secretary DeVos Brings Us

A few days ago, I watched a History Makers interview of Florida's first black Congresswoman Carrie Meek. Before her pioneering work as an elected representative in the halls of Tallahassee and Washington D.C., Congresswoman Meek worked as an educator and administrator at Bethune-Cookman University under the tutelage of famed black leader and educator Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune.

Recounting Dr. Bethune, Congresswoman Meek said "I learned how to make do and how to make something out of very little. And that's something Mrs. Bethune taught. I said she was a conservationist because she taught us to do something with what we had and to try to work hard to make the school better.... And Mrs. Bethune taught that routine over and over again... She taught sacrifice over and over again."

We often hear of the legacy of Johnson at Howard, Patterson at Tuskegee, and Mays at Morehouse in the public's consciousness regarding black colleges. Dr. Bethune's work as a presidential advisor and active club woman often overshadows her work as an institution builder.

While her presidential contemporaries often played exclusively in either academia, civic life, or public policy, Dr. Bethune was influential in the halls of Washington, the skyscrapers of New York, and the backwoods of the South. Bethune-Cookman University owes its name and very existence to this resourceful woman. While most private black colleges are named after white male financiers and black male bishops, Bethune-Cookman is the only private HBCU named after a black woman. In my humble estimation, we don't hear enough about Dr. Bethune and her legacy as a black college presidential icon.

Until today.

Confronted with a rousing chorus of condemnation, Bethune-Cookman University President Dr. Edison Jackson recently defended his choice of U.S. Secretary of Education Betsey DeVos as his university's Commencement Orator by bringing his university's namesake into the morass. In a statement, Dr. Jackson stated, "Much like Dr. Bethune, Founder of Bethune-Cookman University, Secretary DeVos deems the importance of opportunity and hope for students to receive an exceptional education experience. Her mission to empower parents and students resonates with the history and legacy of Dr. Bethune."

I can understand Dr. Jackson meeting with President Trump. I defended it. I can understand Dr. Jackson trying to do everything possible to keep Bethune-Cookman's doors open in the face of recent credit downgrades and two former Bethune-Cookman trustees suing the university for supposed financial malfeasance. I get it.

What I can't understand is the need to prostitute the legacy of Dr. Bethune by connecting her to Secretary DeVos, someone whose short tenure in public life is antithetical to everything that Dr. Bethune stood for. It's one thing to hold your nose and meet President Trump in the Oval Office. It's another thing all together to politicize your student's graduation ceremony with a commencement orator like Secretary Betsey DeVos. Extending the honor of a commencement

address invitation to Secretary DeVos is tantamount to selling what Dr. Bethune's left us for a proverbial mess of pottage.

Let me explain.

Shortly before her death, Dr. Bethune left us with her Last Will & Testament. In the summation of her life's work, Dr. Bethune said "Sometimes I ask myself if I have any other legacy to leave. Truly, my worldly possessions are few. Yet, my experiences have been rich. From them, I have distilled principles and policies in which I believe firmly, for they represent the meaning of my life's work. They are the products of much sweat and sorrow."

And what exactly did Dr. Bethune leave us?

Dr. Bethune left us hope.

According to Dr. Bethune, "The Negro's growth will be great in the years to come. Yesterday, our ancestors endured the degradation of slavery, yet they retained their dignity. Today, we direct our economic and political strength toward winning a more abundant and secure life."

What does Secretary DeVos bring us?

Secretary DeVos brings us the removal of Obama era student loan protections to graduates of Bethune-Cookman University, who on average hold more than \$36,000 in student debt. In the face of only 21% of Bethune-Cookman students paying down their student loan debt, Secretary DeVos is making it tougher for recent Bethune-Cookman graduates to win a "more abundant and secure life" that Dr. Bethune wrote about.

Dr. Bethune left us a thirst for education.

According to Dr. Bethune, "Knowledge is the prime need of the hour.... We are making greater use of the privileges inherent in living in a democracy. If we continue in this trend, we will be able to rear increasing numbers of strong, purposeful men and women, equipped with vision, mental clarity, health and education.

What does Secretary DeVos bring us?

Secretary DeVos brings us the destruction of one of the privileges inherent in a democracy, a public education. Described as the "four-star general of the school voucher movement", Secretary DeVos is a strong proponent of the dubious school choice movement, supporting "vouchers and tax credits, certainly, but also virtual schools, magnet schools, homeschooling, and charter schools."

Dr. Bethune left us racial dignity.

According to Dr. Bethune, "I want Negroes to maintain their human dignity at all costs. We, as Negroes, must recognize that we are the custodians as well as the heirs of a great civilization. We

have given something to the world as a race and for this we are proud and fully conscious of our place in the total picture of mankind's development.”

Secretary DeVos brought us the dubious [notion](#) that HBCUs were “pioneers of school choice’ instead of a result of racists who cried out in the hall of Congress and southern legislatures that black folk could not and would not enter traditionally all white universities.

Dr. Bethune left us a respect for the use of power.

According to Dr. Bethune, “We live in a world which respects power above all things. Power, intelligently directed, can lead to more freedom. Unwisely directed, it can be a dreadful, destructive force.”

What does Secretary DeVos bring us?

Secretary DeVos brings us oligarchy. When confronted with accusations regarding her influence peddling, Secretary DeVos said, "I have decided to stop taking offense at the suggestion that we are buying influence. Now I simply concede the point. They are right.”

Dr. Bethune finally left us with a responsibility to our young people.

According to Dr. Bethune, “The world around us really belongs to youth for youth will take over its future management. Our children must never lose their zeal for building a better world... We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.”

What does Secretary DeVos bring us?

Secretary DeVos brought us a laissez-faire charter school policy agenda for Michigan’s public schools, particularly in Detroit, that has resulted in utter failure. “The bottom line should be, ‘Are kids achieving better or worse because of this expansion of choice?’” said Michigan State Board of Education President John Austin, “It’s destroying learning outcomes ... and the DeVoses were a principal agent of that.”

What Dr. Bethune left us, Secretary DeVos is committed to taking.

Bethune-Cookman University President Edison Jackson, give Secretary DeVos a call and tell her thanks, but no thanks.

For Dr. Bethune’s sake.

By Jerrell Blakeley

