

Diligence: No Such Thing as a Menial Task
Adapted from *Hero Tales, Volume III*, by Dave and Neta Jackson

Born a “free black,” Mary McLeod Bethune had a burning passion to go to school. Later, her desire to give back what she learned resulted in the founding of Bethune-Cookman College.

“Welcome, girls!” I faced my first class of girls. “Enter these doors to learn. Depart to serve.”

The little school in a rented house on the edge of a shantytown in Daytona, Florida, didn’t look like much. We had no school supplies and few books. I had no money, and some of the girls couldn’t pay the fifty cents per week tuition. But the lack of money and supplies didn’t stop me. Organizing the girls into scavenger teams, I had them comb the alleys and town dump for useable items like cooking pots and pound the dents out of them. A packing box served as a desk. Charcoal splinters were used as pencils. Spanish moss hanging from the big oak trees was stuffed into cotton ticks for mattresses. Old clothes were made over to fit the girls.

Mornings were given to book studies: literature, Bible, Latin, history. Afternoons found the girls doing housekeeping chores and learning practical skills, such as how to bake pies, set a proper table, tend a garden, and sew up curtains for the windows. “We seek to educate the head, the hands, and the heart,” I gently reminded the girls when they complained about having to scrub the floors again.

But not everyone was as happy with my philosophy of education. Some of my critics were black people like myself. “You’re teaching the girls to do menial work!” they fussed. “We don’t want to be servants and laborers anymore! Our children need philosophy and science and the arts!”

“They need both,” I countered. “Yes, our people need to reach for their fullest potential, but in the meantime, they need to make a living and take advantage of whatever opportunities are open to them. Besides, there is no such thing as menial work—only a menial attitude.”

The Daytona Educational and Industrial Institute grew from five girls to twenty to two hundred...and more. Even though I went knocking on the doors of blacks and whites alike seeking support for the school, I and the girls worked hard to support ourselves. We planted a vegetable garden and grew beans, carrots, sugarcane, strawberries, and sweet potatoes. Besides food for our own table, we sold fresh vegetables to the local tourists. The girls made sweet potato pies and sold them to the hungry railroad workers eager for some home cooking. Some of the older girls hired themselves out as helpers in wealthy homes as a way to support themselves while getting an education.

“Oh, Mrs. Bethune,” they wailed one day. “How will we ever get these clean?” They showed me a pile of fine white linen tablecloths.

“Boil them,” I instructed.

The girls looked at one another. Boil them? That meant making a fire out in the yard and waiting while the big tub of water heated up. So much work!

Later in the day, I stopped by and noticed dripping wet tablecloths pinned to the clothesline. The girls were taking off their aprons and looking relieved that the task was finally done.

But I came right to the point. “Did you boil them?”

Guiltily the girls hung their heads.

Down came the tablecloths from the line. A fire was made, the water boiled, and the cloths went into the pot. “You can never take a shortcut to thoroughness,” I told the girls. It was a lesson all the students in my school learned, whether they were conjugating Latin verbs or doing laundry.

Diligence is putting forth your best effort, regardless of the task.