

# Marcella Walker McGee (1904-1997)



Marcella Walker McGee was the oldest of three children of George Walker, Sr. and Maud Bush Walker, a well-to-do, Chicago, African-American family. Born there on July 23, 1904, she was christened at the Congregational Church but later attended Sunday School at the Ethical Culture Society when her parents became members.

Marcella, a graduate from the University of Chicago Laboratory High School that had been founded by John Dewey, planned on enrolling in Mount Holyoke, but that desire fell victim to the failure of her father's business. Instead, she took a course that prepared her to be a librarian and set out on a career that would span thirty-two years.

Marcella's skin color made her especially attuned to discrimination. She was a light-skinned African American, and as such was frequently mistaken for white by both Euro and African-Americans. Often neither accepted her. The result of these painful encounters was her strong commitment to social justice.

Her first marriage was to Ernest Ricks, a dentist, and it ended in divorce. They had one daughter, Joan (Harris), who went on to earn a doctorate; Joan and her achievements were a source of pride for Marcella.

In 1945 Marcella married Lewis Allen McGee (1893-1979), an African Methodist Episcopal minister. Lewis soon entered Meadville Theological School, and while completing his studies in order to become a Unitarian minister he wrote a report for the American Unitarian Association (AUA) concerning the viability of establishing a Unitarian congregation in the African American community on Chicago's southside. In 1947 Lewis, Marcella, her brother, George Walker Jr. and others formed the interracial Free Religious Fellowship (FRF). The congregation grew and received the full support as well as funding from the American Unitarian Association and the support of Unitarians in Chicago.

For a time the FRF met in the Abraham Lincoln Center where Marcella worked in the public library. Indeed, much of the Fellowship's success was due to Marcella's many connections. Creating numerous groups and activities, including a choir, study groups and a women's group she was an integral part of FRFs ministry, and the ministry of the other congregation Lewis served over the next twenty years. Overflowing with love and joy, an open and generous person, she loved to play bridge, and was an excellent cook and seamstress. Wherever they were Lewis and Marcella were universally loved and respected.

In 1960 Marcella was elected to the continental board of the joint Alliance of Unitarian Women and the Association of Universalist Women, where as a member of the Leadership committee she was instrumental in bringing the two women's groups together for consolidation in 1961, as the two groups merged to become the UUWF. When later the UUWF held its first continent-wide Leadership Conference in Asilomar, California Marcella was the Conference Chair.

In 1994 the UUWF enrolled Marcella in the Clara Barton Sisterhood; this award is bestowed on women over eighty who have dedicated themselves to the cause of liberal religion.

Marcella Walker McGee died on May 28, 1997.

Other Sources:

*Unitarian and Universalist Women: Liberating History*, UU Women's Heritage Society, Blackstone Editions, Providence, 2008, pp. 168-169.

*Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, Mark D. Morrison-Reed, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1994, pp. 113-140.