

Maya Angelou opened her life to open our eyes

Written by Jazelle Hunt, NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The day before she died, Maya Angelou telephoned Ebony magazine headquarters in Chicago to tell new editor-in-chief Mitzi Miller that she was proud of her. They barely knew each other. Miller knew Angelou mostly through her writings.

"She spoke to me for 10 minutes, so generously and complimentary toward the work I had done in JET. She said that she had just called to tell me how much she had been enjoying JET...and she was proud of how much I had done," Miller recalls. "I'm stuttering, trying to keep up. It was a brush with greatness. I feel so blessed that, for whatever reason, she decided to call me. I feel incredibly grateful."

It was a final gesture that exemplified Angelou's sincerity and openness. As inimitable as she was, she had a way of making everyone feel they were her best friend.

"This is someone that I have followed my entire life, read her books, looked up to...and she was on the phone with me," Miller continues. "Having a really everyday conversation, kind of how you'd expect your aunt to call you, like 'girl, I'm so proud of you.' And the next day she had passed."

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Angelou was born in St. Louis, Mo. as Marguerite Johnson, but assumed the name Maya Angelou and many other titles over her 86 years: writer, activist, entertainer, San Francisco's first Black female street car conductor, professor, doctor, linguist, winner of three Grammys, the NAACP Springarm Medal, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, to name just a few.

But in her own words, she was simply "a teacher who writes." And many remember her as that – and so much more.

"There are two things she taught me that I try to remember," says Susan Taylor, former editor of Essence magazine. "One moment we were chatting and I was very stressed about work. And she told me, time spent away from your desk renewing yourself is as important as time spent hunkered over your work. And that we should never beat up ourselves or feel guilty...she said to me, as I'm sure she's said to many others, we have to do as well as we know how to do, until we know better. Then when we know better, we can do better."

Even through her status as an international icon, Angelou constantly took others under her wing, inviting them to her home, feeding, regaling, and encouraging them to live well and pursue their goals. She loved to celebrate and entertain, from warm Thanksgivings with friends and mentees who became her chosen family, to lavish garden parties and ceremonies held in her honor.

CNN contributor and Democratic strategist Donna Brazile recounts reading her work as a girl, and ending up dining with her as an adult.

"Once, my friend Minyon Moore hosted a luncheon in honor of Betty Shabazz, Cicely Tyson, Coretta Scott King and Maya Angelou. It was a moment for us, the up-and-coming, to meet our heroes, to sit at their feet and learn from them," she said. "Before we could break bread (cornbread), Maya had everyone laughing. She made a place for so many folks in her life, in her kitchen or on her stage."

Ingrid Saunders Jones, another mentee and chair of the National Council of Negro Women, remembers Angelou's portrait unveiling ceremony at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. It was the day after Angelou's 86th birthday, and the last time Jones, former chair of the Coca-Cola Foundation, would see her.

"What I saw that day was complete delight from her that this was happening, and that she was surrounded by people she loved and people who loved her. It was just a love fest," Jones says. "She gathered all her strength – she was so strong that day – as she answered questions about herself. And she sang to us. It was just a day never to be forgotten."

In 2009, National Urban League President and CEO, Marc Morial went to Angelou's home to request her participation in the League's centennial celebration.

"What followed was hours of conversation sitting at her kitchen table as she told stories, gave life lessons, and shared poignant perspectives on art, culture and humankind," he shared. "With equal parts majesty and humility, she held court – and I listened intently, absorbing every word

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and meaning that she had to impart. It was an incredibly powerful experience, and I will always be grateful."

The visit resulted in her poem titled, "We Hear You."

Through her works, generations will continue to sit at her kitchen table by proxy. Her most famous works, such as "Still I Rise," "Phenomenal Woman," and "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," were imbued with her wisdom and power. Her words could lift a reader out of a personal nadir, fortify, and quietly cheer him or her toward the best version of themselves.

Angelou backed her eloquence with gritty action. An active participant of the Civil Rights Movement – she served as northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) – her time was dedicated to human rights and dignified life for all.

"As much as she was an international figure, she was still very much as down-to-earth as soil," says University of Louisville Business Professor Nat Irvin II, a longtime friend who taught with her at Wake Forest University and attended the same church. "She was majorly dedicated to the common humanity of all people. That's where her heart rested. That's what her life was about."

Rep. John Lewis [D-Ga.] called her a "soothsayer," adding that her talents and activism "set this nation on a path toward freedom." He continued, "America is a better place, and we are a better people because Dr. Maya Angelou lived."

From serving in a leadership for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to helping Malcolm X establish the Organization of African American Unity just before his assassination, to lending her voice to push for gay rights, Maya Angelou was a consistent crusader for fairness.

"Over the course of a career spanning some of the most tumultuous decades of the last century, she taught us how to rise above 'a past that's rooted in pain,'" said Attorney General Eric Holder, whose firstborn was named after Angelou. "She gave voice to a people too often shut out of America's public discourse."

Last week, Angelou gave her last public interview to Susan Taylor's National CARES Mentoring Movement, which seeks to elevate the state of Black youth through targeted, skilled mentorship. Angelou wrote its "Pledge to Young People," and often delivered at the organization's local affiliates over the years.

"She was always getting engaged in what really matters most – ensuring the education and well-being of children struggling along the margins," Taylor says. "One thing I think she wanted to really impart was the importance of being courageous – you can have all the other virtues but it's meaningless without courage. It takes courage, commitment, and strategy to change reality, to stand with people in crushing circumstances. That was the mandate of her life."

But above all, she was human. In her autobiographical works, she let the world in on her pain, her uncertainties, and her forays into the wilder side of life, including prostitution. In sharing so

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much of herself, she led millions to self-acceptance, self-love, and self-actualization.

"I think of how willing she was to share her journey so all of us would know that life is not perfect," says Ingrid Saunders Jones. "And she articulated it in a way that helped so many people. She taught us through the sharing of her life."

Marcia Ann Gillespie, former editor of Essence and Ms. magazines, agrees.

"She was a WOMAN. All caps. She was a woman who lived her life to the fullest, enjoyed the company of men, loved her scotch, lived life to the max, was adventurous...she was an activist and icon, and I think all that will be captured, but we forget they're living, breathing, human beings," Gillespie says. "She, by example, taught us that it was important to own our lives, not to try to edit or change things, not to feel guilty, and to own both our mistakes and our triumphs."