

## **Myrna Colley-Lee: A Tallahatchie Treasure**

Thank you to CARE, especially Glenna and Ed & Becky Meek, for the opportunity to honor our Myrna. It's a joy to be back with you today.

### **ABOUT ME**

For those who don't know me, I started working with Myrna as an intern in the summer of 2003. And, despite resigning twice since then, I still work for Myrna in one way or another. She's like the Hotel California: you can check out, but you can never leave. Once Myrna has decided to adopt you, there's nothing you can do about it.

### **CARE**

It's been my privilege to be alongside Myrna—and CARE—for many years.

One of my earliest memories of what would be the founding of CARE was when Myrna told me some friends were coming by—to paint a pig.

Charleston had just had a cultural study done, and Scissors was identified as a unique icon. At the time, few remembered the story of Charleston's world-famous pig, and his house was in shambles. So Myrna, and Glenna, Jackie, Peggy Bordelon, and Sheila Burnett rolled up their sleeves. They went out and found the biggest concrete pig they could—so big that Myrna sent a truck and trailer to go get it. They painted the pig at the farm, where he stayed while his house underwent a multi-year restoration. Now he greets everyone entering Charleston from the East.

Not long after that, I began attending CARE board meetings at the library in Myrna's stead when she was gone—which was pretty often—so eventually they put me on the board around the time CARE bought this building.

Glenna is probably the only person who truly knows, but for two decades, any investment that Rock River Foundation made in Charleston was a result of Myrna—from funding student field trips to providing the match for this very building.

After we created the SonEdna Foundation and began offering writing workshops, CARE was our first—and primary partner. So, every time a writer came to town, we made sure *something* happened in partnership with CARE.

A few years later, when MS Museum of Art produced an exhibition of Myrna's costume designs, she insisted the tour be available to Charleston first. So, we met with the folks from MMA—and with Myrna's support and Rock River's funding—we were able to get CARE to become part of MMA's affiliate network. And soon after, there

were prints by Picasso and Monet right here on the Court Square, as part of an exhibition series that ran for several years, funded by Rock River.

Around that time, with more than a little arm twisting from Myrna, E'Dena offered CARE's first theater camp. She came back with friends a few summers later to lead another summer camp. And, when the worst thing imaginable happened, this is where we celebrated her life.

So it is especially fitting to be in this place today.

### **THREE THINGS**

Usually, these kinds of events are when you learn interesting tidbits about someone's career, stacks of awards, or international reach. I could tell you about Myrna designing costumes for performances in front of two popes, or meeting presidents, or that her work is documented at the Smithsonian—but those things are already known about Myrna. So I'd like to share three things that aren't known by the public, about why she's such a Tallahatchie Treasure:

1. Some of what makes Myrna special; that
2. Charleston is home—and,
3. Above all, Myrna's contributions as a Mississippi arts patron have been most important to her.

## **1. What Makes Myrna Special**

### **INSTANT WARMTH**

Who doesn't love Myrna?  
As the Beatles sang, To know her is to love her.

More than that, though, her warmth and charm give her a unique ability to make anyone feel at home the moment she meets them.

### **INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE**

That characteristic warmth transcends the momentary. Once Myrna adopts you, you're part of the family. I have a dozen brothers and sisters who've all been chosen by Myrna. And we're all better for it.

## **MYRNARIZE**

If you've spent any time with Myrna, it's likely been working on some kind of project. She LOVES a project, and is famous for turning anyone into an assistant. Perhaps that's because any time she's awake, she is constantly working to make things better—whether you want her to, or not!

That's part of her special talent of making a place a home. A few years ago, this became known as "Myrnarizing." It stuck immediately.

## **2. CHARLESTON IS HOME**

Because she does travel often—and she likes her solitude—people often think Myrna lives somewhere else. But time and time again, Myrna has chosen Charleston:

- Starting in the mid-80s, she began bringing E'Dena down, on the train from NY for summers with Mamie and she's pretty much been here ever since.
- Not long after, she brought all of NY to Mississippi for her wedding. I wasn't there, but have been told by several friends how she used stacks of quilts to transform a cotton field and Boclair's Motel into a Mississippi experience so memorable that it's *still* talked about in corners of NY & LA.
- For decades, she joked "have plane, will work." But more thoughtfully, she'd say, "I can work anywhere. This is home."
- Then, after the marriage ended, many—including myself—assumed she would want to move—probably to somewhere with organic vegetables, movies, and theater. But she never considered it. "This is home, she reaffirmed."

## **And that's why she MYRNARIZES CHARLESTON**

More than painting the pig, Myrna's fingerprint is invisibly all over town.

When the board of supervisors wouldn't fund the county library, Myrna made sure they got books. In fact, over several years, SonEdna's book drive resulted in more than 10,000 donated. But that wasn't her first time giving books to a library in Charleston. A few years before, she donated her father's collection of books and maps to the middle school, after having bought ill-fated books for the elementary school library earlier.

Books are a theme for Myrna. She sees them as an opportunity for people to learn about other worlds, opening up new possibilities for their future. One of her favorite ways to give back is reading to children in Charleston, like Story Time with Myrna at the Gateway Festival.

So, of course, when Charleston's contestant for Poetry Out Loud couldn't get to the state competition, Myrna made sure she got there—and she won!

These three themes—what makes Myrna special, that Charleston is home, and working to provide opportunities in Mississippi—are often inseparable.

## **SonEdna**

For example, when Myrna began thinking long-term about the future of all she had built here, she had two concerns: sustainability and benefit to Charleston. What resulted was the SonEdna Foundation, which I had the privilege of leading.

For ten years, SonEdna provided writing workshops, residencies, and public presentations. Any time we created a new program, it always came back to—how does it support Charleston? So, we didn't merely host writers for secluded retreats. They were required to provide some sort of giveback to the community. Sometimes that meant giving public readings; other times it was workshops in this very building—but this was always key for Myrna.

## **SHARED RESOURCES**

Myrna has a core belief—that we all have a responsibility to contribute to the collective—and that drives her to share her resources—especially her art. When the SonEdna Foundation had an event about the Harlem Renaissance at Charleston High School, Myrna let us take original paintings from the Harlem Renaissance off the walls of her house to the auditorium for people to enjoy, providing set dressing for the program.

Similarly, wanting to provide Mississippians access to information about Black theater, Myrna intentionally chose to donate her collections of costumes and designs to Mississippi State—where they've been used for productions, research, and exhibitions since then.

Because she believes that art should be seen by the public, she has supported exhibitions of art from her personal collection. 2013 saw the launch of the traveling exhibition, "Reflections." As a result, paintings, photographs, and sculpture that were largely by and about Mississippians were featured all over the country, at a dozen museums, from Washington, DC to Laurel, MS. And several of these pieces are now on display at the Mississippi Museum of Art.

## **THE QUIET GIANT**

What many don't know is that this intersection of her unwavering belief in the power of the arts – and her longstanding commitment to this place is the work she enjoys most. Much of Myrna's arts support has been unseen to the public, but she is mightily influential wherever decisions are being made about the arts in Mississippi—making sure Charleston and Tallahatchie County had a seat at the table.

Most notably, she was a gubernatorial appointee to the Arts Commission with the support of Democrat and Republican administrations alike, for twenty years—the longest tenure of anyone in the agency's history.

So, when Governor Barbour established the commission to create what became the Two Museums, Myrna was one of the people he appointed.

The Mississippi Museum of Art tried to get Myrna to join their board for years before she said yes—but she said no because she was so committed to her work with SonEdna, MAC, and MSU. Now that she's joined the MMA board, Myrna chairs the committee that determines what the museum acquires.

In addition to those, her commitment to public service has led her to formally advise the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Bob Canon's Mississippi Festival Foundation, the Gertrude C. Ford Center for the Performing Arts, Delta State University's Year of the Arts, and Mississippi State University Department of Art.

### **FINALLY,**

Since Myrna's career as a costume designer has been well documented, I worked with AI to analyze her resume. Based on the size of the theaters where she's worked and the length of the various productions, over 60 years, well over two million people have seen the characters she's created. But for those of us who know her best, her true reach isn't measured by butts in seats. It is measured in lives changed.

For more than 20 years—as she has done with land, homes, discarded furniture, and many other people—Myrna saw possibility in me, nurtured me, and costumed me literally and metaphorically.

– And I know of a dozen more who could say the same thing.

It's my privilege to help honor you, our Tallahatchie Treasure, on behalf of a grateful community.