

How Madam C.J. Walker Overcame Gender Discrimination and Life's Hardships to Become America's First Female Millionaire

Lili Kiraly

Research Scholars Program, Harvard Student Agencies, In collaboration with Learn with Leaders

ABSTRACT

Who is Madam C.J. Walker? Sarah Breedlove Walker, also known as Madam C.J. Walker was the first African-American female millionaire in America. She is known not only for her line of homemade hair care products for black women, but also for her work to end lynching and fight for women's rights. As one of the most inspirational women, her beliefs that “you have strength you don’t even realize”; “solving a problem for yourself can fix something for others”; “collaborate with people who believe in your vision”, were her three keys to success. This paper discusses the parts of her life that support the same.

INTRODUCTION

“You have strength you don’t even realize”

The daughter of Owen and Minerva Breedlove, Sarah was born on 23 December 1867 in Delta, Louisiana (“Madam C.J. Walker”). She rose from poverty to become one of the wealthiest African American women of her time and her road to success is extraordinary. Born as the child of sharecroppers, her parents died when she was just 7 years old (*HISTORY*, 2022). Orphaned, she moved to Vicksburg at the age of 10 with her sister Louvenia (Zipkin, 2018), where she worked as a farm laborer and, at the age of fourteen, married Moses McWilliams (*HISTORY*, 2022). The reason for the marriage was to escape an exploitative working environment and her abusive brother-in-law in Mississippi. She has clearly had a difficult path because child marriage and child labor are both violations of children's human rights and instances of gender-based abuse that also interfere with education. At 20, her husband died and she was left as a widow and single mother to a two-year-old daughter. She relocated, attempted to support herself by working as a laundress for less than \$2 a day, and continued her studies by attending public night schools (Michals, 2022). She understood the advantages women of her ethnicity could experience by enhancing their physical appearance in the 1890s (“Madam C.J. Walker”). However, she was struggling financially, feeling the wear and tear of years of physical work (Michals, 2022), and facing hair loss due to a scalp disorder. It did not take her down, rather she was inspired to create haircare products for Black women. She started applying “The Great Wonderful Hair Grower,” a product created by African American entrepreneur Annie Turbo Malone, and she also joined Malone's group of black women sales agents (Michals, 2022). She overcame numerous hardships and managed to learn from the situation and win. Her story has proved inspirational to many.

“Solving a problem for yourself can fix something for others”

Madam C.J. Walker then turned away from Malone’s team and decided to use her position to advocate for many other black women who suffered with the same problem. She was motivated to start her own business after realizing there was a genuine demand. With little to no professional expertise, she knew one thing and that was that she had to fight for herself and for others. She tried different formulae to grow and straighten her hair. She developed a treatment that would fundamentally alter the Black hair care industry somewhere between 1900 and 1905 (Michals, 2022). It was a recipe to promote hair growth, and the “secret” component was presumably sulphur (“Madam C.J. Walker”). She founded her own company using this formula and the creation of a steel comb that could straighten hair when heated and used in conjunction with a specific cream (*HISTORY*, 2022). She launched it with the name Madam C.J. Walker after marrying her third husband Charles Joseph Walker in 1906 (“Losing Paradise”, n.d.). She spent a year and a half traveling the country, selling Madam Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower door to door and giving demonstrations at churches and public places. It was a success, enabling her to establish her first training facility in Pittsburgh in 1908 and her first factory in Indianapolis two years later (Zipkin, 2018). Madame CJ Walker is living proof that you can do anything. She distinguished her product from the many

other black hair products that were widely produced by white companies by highlighting its focus on the health of the women who would use it (“Madam C. J. Walker”). She knew her audience. She respected herself, her story, the customers and the customers’ stories with all that she won loyalty and respect from customers.

“Collaborate with people who believe in your vision”

We all need supportive, stable forces in our lives. Achieving our goals is usually something that requires us to rule out impossibilities, negativity and distractions. However, a true successful person thinks about who they are surrounded by and what they can gain and learn from having them in their life. Madam CJ Walker managed to build a circle of people with similar visions who maximally supported each other. By advocating for the same issues, together, they could achieve a great percent of productivity. When people collaborate for a common goal, they can all use their experience and skills to contribute to its success and bring something great to the table. Let’s look at this a little more in depth. Initially, Walker’s husband, Charles “C.J.” Joseph Walker, helped with advertising and establishing a mail order business. On his advice, she changed her name to “Madam C.J. Walker”. They felt it was a more recognizable name. This may have raised a lot of feminist comments, but at the time women had no place in business and it actually helped her, so consider this a smart business decision. Walker was once a one-woman operation, but she made it her mission to educate women who might represent her business as ambassadors by founding the Lelia College of Beauty Culture. She had 25,000 Walker agents around the nation by 1919 who had graduated from the institution (Bundles &Hollar, 2022). With that she gave back to aspiring business women by providing career opportunities and investing in their futures with “beauty culturalists” training programs that helped grow her company (Sklar, n.d.). Only Walker's reputation as a philanthropist rivalled that of her as an entrepreneur. She pushed female talent during a time when Black women's employment opportunities were rather limited, even mandating in her company's charter that only a woman may hold the position of president (“Madam C. J. Walker”). She made considerable contributions to Black charities and educational causes, supporting scholarships for female Tuskegee Institute students as well as the NAACP, the Black YMCA, and numerous other groups that contributed to the making of Black history (HISTORY, 2022). These show again that she wanted to see everyone succeed. She believed in them, gave them an opportunity and supported them whenever wherever. She had a remarkably successful career, using it to become a civil rights activist and forging lifelong bonds with a number of significant American icons, including the passionately pro-justice journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the editor and activist William Monroe Trotter, and opera singer Enrico Caruso (Desta). Her other friends, including Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Mary Talbert, were also all active in promoting civil rights and anti-lynching (HISTORY, 2022). Madam CJ Walker surrounded herself with similar minded people to bring out the maximum potential of herself and her vision.

CONCLUSION

Madam C.J. Walker was a businesswoman, philanthropist, and activist who came from poverty to become one of the wealthiest African-American women of her era. She made use of her position to promote anti-lynching and the advancement of black Americans. She was not afraid to take risks. Walker had a strong sense of the importance of community and in the ability to influence others. Despite being a formidable force in her own right, she sought to improve the community. One of the first businesswomen to achieve success, she also expanded her influence via philanthropy and dedication to others. Thanks to entrepreneurs like Madam C.J. Walker, there are now generations of women who recognize the shortcomings of industries and create the things they want and need, despite the obstacles. So, what Madam CJ Walker teaches us is to not give up on ourselves, no matter what position one might be in. One has to keep one's vision in mind and not get in one's own way. As she has always said "(She) got (her) start by giving (herself) a start."

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