Maya Angelou: A Phenomenal Woman

Maya Angelou, born Marguerite Johnson in 1928, was one of every of the foremost cogent voices of the past century.

Many know her for her work as a civil rights activist and poet. However, many don't recognize her for her artistic side as a dancer, singer, actress, playwright, and producer, or for what she has had to overcome to reach her spot in the world today.

The first reminiscences of Angelou's childhood began with the tip of her parents' wedding.

After the nasty divorce, her parents sent her and her brother at the age of three and four from Missouri to Arkansas to live with their grandmother, Annie Henderson, who they referred to as Momma and who soon became a major figure in Angelou's life as a role model and the mother she never had.

While being sent back to her mother at age seven, Angelou experienced sexual assault and rape by her mother's boyfriend at the time. After the man was convicted and released from jail, he was found beaten to death by Angelou's uncles and cousins. Because of the trauma, Angelou resorted to a form of selective mutism and later said, "'I thought, my voice killed him; I killed that man because I told his name. And then I believed I'd ne'er spoken once more because my voice would kill anyone. (Angelou, 23)'"

For the years that followed, her refusing to speak turned into a more serious form of mutism which she says she found addicting to lean on. However, it was also during those years when Angelou was majorly exposed to poetry and authors like Edgar Allen Poe, Langston Hughes, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar by family and friends such as Ms. Bertha Flowers. Even before the incident, she had always been in love with Shakespeare's writings. Expressing her forbidden love for him in her memoir, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, she wrote: "He was my first white love […] I pacified myself about

his achromatic color by speech communication that on balance he had been dead farewell it couldn't touch anyone from now on."

With the never-ending support of her grandmother, brother, and literature, she gradually began to speak again and was soon accepted with a full scholarship to San Francisco's Labor School to study dance and performance. Angelou dropped out to become the first black female cable car conductor but continued her education, giving birth a few weeks after graduation to Clyde (Guy) Johnson. To support herself and her son in the real world, she worked a number of odd jobs including waitressing, dancing, and prostituting.

Soon, her passion for dancing and acting began to take center stage. After being spotted dancing in a nightclub, Angelou landed a leading role in a production of George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, touring in over 22 countries in Europe and Africa. In her time as a performer, she starred in off-Broadway productions of Calypso Heat Wave (1957), The Blacks (1961), and a musical revue she organized herself named Cabaret for Freedom (inspired by Martin Luther

King Jr.), as well as releasing her first album, Miss Calypso (1957). She talked about her career with emotion and passion, stating: “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

When her performing career seemed to be ending, Angelou left many collections of poetry to her name, including Phenomenal Woman and Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die to national acclaim. One of her most famous works was before Bill Clinton at his inaugural ceremony in 1993, where she recited a poem she wrote especially for him, called On the Pulse of Morning. Her performing career was shown to still be intact, as she won a Grammy for the spoken word version of that very poem.

Her poetry has also expanded her perspectives and influence across economic, social, and racial frontiers that had not been crossed before. As well as being known for her poetry, Angelou, encouraged by her friend and fellow writer James Baldwin wrote the bestselling memoir I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings to international success and became the first African-American woman to have a nonfiction bestseller. Writing about her abusive childhood and depressing youth opened up new doors for discussion in a world unaware of her struggles and brought an even wider range of recognition for audiences all over the world.

Angelou’s legacy has been left behind in millions of hearts since her death in 2014.