



CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF

Marissa McCall Dodson

HEAVEN SENT: SEPTEMBER 10, 1983

CALLED HOME: MAY 21, 2021

SATURDAY, JUNE 12, 2021 • 2:00 P.M.

HISTORIC EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH

101 JACKSON STREET NORTH EAST • ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30312

REVEREND DR. RAPHAEL GAMALIEL WARNOCK

FAITHFUL CENTRAL BIBLE CHURCH (HOME CHURCH)

400 WEST FLORENCE AVENUE, INGLEWOOD, CALIFORNIA 90301

BISHOP DR. KENNETH C. ULMER

REVEREND JOHN H. VAUGHN, D.MIN, OFFICIANT

HISTORIC EBENEZER BAPTIST CHURCH

Celebrating Marissa's Life

ProcessionalClergy and The Family

Scripture Reading

Old Testament..... *"Psalm 23"*Rev. Dr. John H. Vaughn

New Testament..... *"John 14:1-6"*Pastor Benjamin E. V. Lett
Hill Chapel Baptist Church
Athens, GA

Prayer Rev. Dr. John H. Vaughn

Photo Video Montage.....The Life of Marissa McCall Dodson

Remarks

Mentor.....Stacey Abrams

FriendTiffany Williams Roberts

Father..... David McCall

Acknowledgments / Resolutions

Letter of ComfortFaithful Central Bible Church Bishop Kenneth C. Ulmer
Read by Anana Johari Harris

Song *"Alabaster Box"*Tamika Patton

Words of Comfort / Eulogy.....Pastor Edward Taylor
Antioch Missionary Baptist Church
Pomona, California

Clips of Marissa's Speeches

Danisha's Tribute to Marissa.....Read by Tiffany Williams Roberts

Recessional

Reflections of Her Life

MARISSA MCCALL DODSON, was born at the Santa Ana Community Hospital in Santa Ana, California on September 10, 1983 at 2:21 p.m. to her proud parents Eva Katholeen and David McCall. A bright and amazing child from birth, Marissa quickly learned how to capture the attention of her mom and dad. Having started walking and talking early, and never being one to use baby talk, Marissa asserted herself in the household, making plain her desires and expectations for getting her needs met.

A self-starter from a young age, her father fondly recalls Marissa, at three years old, sitting atop his lap and reading a restaurant menu. Marissa was not quite two-and-a-half years old when Danisha was born, on January 6, 1986. Danisha's arrival ignited in Marissa what would become a lifetime of mothering care and protection for her younger sister. Her family often recounts the joy and smile on her face when Danisha arrived home from the hospital and was placed in Marissa's lap. Marissa's parents had told her that Danisha was her baby and that mommy and daddy would help her with her baby. Given her lifetime of devotion to Danisha, it is clear that even from a tender age, Marissa took seriously her role as big sister. Their relationship only deepened over the years to what is best described as a Best Friend Sisterhood. The sisters shared a love of basketball and both lettered each of four years of varsity high school basketball while playing three years together.

Marissa McCall married Arion Davarius Dodson, Sr. on March 24, 2007 and, to honor her family roots, maintained McCall as her middle name. From this union, on March 30, 2010, Marissa welcomed her beautiful and brilliant son, Arion Davarius Dodson, Jr. ("AJ"), and he has been the center of her whole world ever since. AJ was to Marissa her "sonshine," her bubba, her pumpkin, her sweet pea, her "Age," the one who gave her joy above all else and who was the absolute love of her life. As she said, her love for AJ was, "a love that you could never imagine" and her love was purely and freely given to him.

As a mother, as with every area of her life, Marissa was wise beyond her years, as evidenced by the gracious, fun-loving, and thoughtful way AJ now moves through the world.

Marissa instilled a love of basketball in AJ as well and spent countless hours coaching AJ's community and AAU basketball teams, drawing on her lifelong love of the sport. She taught him how to shoot, dribble, invested in his skills training, and went on to be his first coach, demonstrating from a different role the importance of grace under pressure, unwavering patience, commitment, discipline, work ethic, teamwork, sacrifice, and a genuine love of the game. Marissa loved watching her son playing tenacious defense, getting steals, getting "and-1's", going to the free throw line, doing his routine there, and patiently knocking down the free throw, before taking the ball to the goal. AJ's skill and discipline in the sport were sources of pride for Marissa, but what she treasured most was his kindness and sportsmanship.

Marissa and AJ shared a love for adventure and enjoyed traveling together to experience new things. Whether it was swimming with dolphins, watching the Lakers play, dancing together, singing, or eating beignets, nothing lit up Marissa's face like the sight of AJ's smile. She fiercely guarded her relationship with AJ and let nothing interfere with their time together. During his birthday trip to New Orleans this year, she said it best herself, "When he's happy, I'm happy," and she endeavored to not only bring him happiness, but also sow into his life seeds of integrity, faith, loyalty, respect, and fidelity, each a characteristic that she embodied and that he now carries in his heart and soul forever.

Marissa's life allowed the world to witness the beauty of humble servant leadership and selfless friendship. With her transition, we are reminded that she was a force of grace, justice, joy, and love.

Her legacy will serve as an enduring light for all, but none as much as her most beloved son, Arion Davarius Dodson, Jr.; proud, supportive father David McCall (Los Angeles, California); encouraging mother, Eva Katholeen McCall-Parry and her husband Paul Parry (Ontario, California); devoted sister, Danisha Shavonne McCall (Newburgh, Indiana); beloved friend, Desmond Hightower (Atlanta, Georgia); doting aunts and uncles Barbara Johnson (Columbus, Ohio), Frances McCall (Moreno Valley, California), James McCall (Newark, Ohio), Guy Morales and Adriane Ables-Morales (Los Angeles, California), and Ted and Linda Porter (El Paso, Texas); Godparents, Paul and Nadine Daniels (Compton, California); Edward and Johnnie Taylor (Eastvale, California), and a host of family members and friends.

Academic and Professional Life

The Spelman Way

Marissa first found her way to Atlanta, Georgia to further her education at the illustrious Spelman College where, from the start, she made lifelong friends. Marissa also joined the Freshman Midwest/Westcoast Step Team, where more enduring friendships began, and later went on to become a coach for future incoming freshmen and a long-standing mentor to many. During her remaining years at Spelman, Marissa continued to leave an indelible impression by volunteering weekly in the surrounding community, becoming a Resident Assistant, and holding a job, all while maintaining an impressive grade point average. Marissa's hard work and commitment to high scholastic achievement throughout her undergraduate career was recognized through membership in several prestigious honor societies. Most notably, the Ethel Waddell Githii Honors program, National Society of Collegiate Scholars, National Dean's List, and Women of Excellence and Leadership Series.

Marissa graduated cum laude from Spelman in 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science which included a Minor in United States History.

Law on the Bayou

Marissa went on to receive her Juris Doctorate and Bachelor of Civil Law magna cum laude from the Paul M. Hebert Law Center at Louisiana State University (LSU), in 2008, where she excelled in coursework well beyond the scope of her ultimate focus in criminal law. Marissa received the prestigious CALI Award, given to the student with the highest grade in a particular course, in classes including Civil Rights Litigation, Gender and the Law, Local Government Law, Taxation of Capital Gains, Immigration Law, and Constitutional Law Seminar.

The legacy of her ultimate legal work in service to others and exceptional ability to capture the attention of her audience with her sophistication and grace was foreshadowed in her involvement in LSU's Public Interest Legal Society, Black Law Students Association, and American Bar Association Mediation and Arbitration Moot Court Team. Marissa's generous contributions to her law school community are reflected in the investments she continued to make in her civic and professional communities throughout her life.

Drum Major for Justice

From the moment her legal practice began as an Equal Justice Works Fellow at the Georgia Justice Project (GJP) in 2008, Marissa was, as the Atlanta Journal Constitution described, the right person for the times. As a fellow, she built a groundbreaking program at GJP addressing the inadequate access to resources formerly incarcerated people suffer. Her projects at GJP remain a significant share of that organization's work.

]Marissa joined the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) in 2016 as the Public Policy Director where she was responsible for developing and advocating for legislation furthering SCHR's mission, including reforming harsh sentencing laws, enhancing alternatives to incarceration, abolishing the death penalty, strengthening the public defender system, and ending the criminalization of poverty.

For more than a decade, Marissa contributed in critical and material ways to reforming the criminal legal system, never losing sight of the humanity and dignity of the people impacted by that system, with whom she partnered, in hope of improving life for many more, every day. Marissa's cunning legal mind and deep emotional intelligence undergirded her success in contributing to significant policy initiatives that expanded criminal record restriction, eliminated cash bail in Atlanta Municipal Court, brought dignity to incarcerated women through banning shackling during pregnancy, and, most recently, ended the draconian practice of Citizen's Arrest in Georgia.

Along the way, Marissa minced no words when it came to calling out the racist and classist power structures that are the very scaffolding of our criminal legal system and she was tireless in her work to tear it down.

As a locally and nationally recognized leader, Marissa was a frequent keynote speaker, panel moderator, panelist, and contributor to the written record of criminal legal system reform. She appeared as the keynote speaker at Georgia State University College of Law's Law Week in 2017 and, while myriad articles and publications feature her written commentary and advocacy, she was especially proud of her contribution of a chapter on Advocacy, Activism, and Policy Practice in Social Work, Criminal Justice, and the Death Penalty, edited by Lauren A. Ricciardelli.

Although Marissa did not seek the praise of others, her selfless investment of her talents into the work of reform received well-deserved accolades including the State Bar of Georgia's Young Lawyer Division's Commitment to Justice Award, being named to the Fulton County Daily Report's "On the Rise" list of leading Georgia lawyers under the age of 40, and receiving the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyer's Champion of State Criminal Justice Reform Award in 2015. In 2019, Marissa was appointed as a Director of the Council on Criminal Justice, a think tank organization that advances the understanding of criminal justice policy choices and builds consensus for solutions that enhance safety and justice for all and she was recently among a select group of 15 women chosen to shape the vision and mission and lead the work of the Women of Color Initiative. Marissa was also most honored to serve as a member of the National Advisory Board of Forever Family, an Atlanta-based organization focused on providing services to children with incarcerated parents and their families.



My Son

"If ever there is tomorrow when we're not together... there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we're apart... I'll always be with you."



A Tribute to my Mommy

PROVERBS 31 . . . "A VIRTUOUS WOMAN . . .

The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him. 2) What, my son? and what, the son of my womb? And what, the son of my vows? 3) Give not thy strength unto women, nor thy ways to that which destroyeth kings. 4) It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: 5) Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. 6) Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. 7) let him drink, and forget His poverty, and remember his misery no more. 8) Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. 9) Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy. 10) Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. 11) The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. 12) She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. 13) She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. 14) She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar. 15) She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. 16) She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. 17) She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. 18) She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. 19) She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. 20) She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. 21) She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22) She maketh herself coverings of tapestry: her clothing is silk and purple. 23) Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. 24) She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. 25) Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. 26) She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. 27) She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. 28) Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. 29) Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. 30) Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. 31) Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates".

FROM YOUR "SON AJ"



Mother

"Marissa you will always be a part of my heart. I love you forevermore, your Mommy."

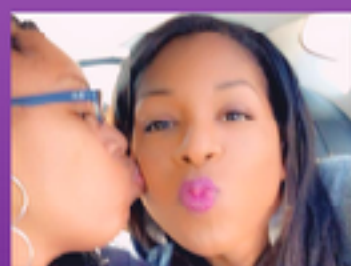




My

*"My sister is better than yours."
"#MSIBTY" was our next planned tattoo.
So, to everybody reading these words,
remember, my sister is better than yours.*

Sister



Daddy



From the time she came home from the hospital it was clear that she knew how to effectively influence people to get things done. Even in her earliest days, she had my number. The first week of her life sharing our room in her bassinet, Katholeen and I jumped up at her slightest whimper only to find her sleeping soundly with a sly grin on her face as if to say, yes, I've got you just where I want you...wrapped around my finger! At her first follow up appointment with the pediatrician we gained the confidence that first-time parents often need in order to allow their baby to sleep in their own room. We were informed that Marissa would cry loud enough to awaken us if she really needed us. That was the first night, we as a family were able to sleep soundly all night which was the start of great happiness and peace.

As our first child, Marissa was, if only for a couple of years, the center of our world. Having made us parents, she was the center of our attention and focus of our days. In my mind, she could do no wrong. I snapped so many photos that we have three baby books full of memories of our precious girl. Some of my fondest early memories are of when she would wake early with me and watch me get dressed with gospel music playing in the background.

Growing up in a household with five siblings, it was critically important to me that Marissa not experience any slight or neglect when her sister was born. One way we insured this happened was by instructing visitors to acknowledge Marissa first and she would show them her baby. Looking back, it seems there was a deliberate engagement of Marissa in her role as big sister that helped each child establish their own unique place in our family without threat or rivalry.

Over the years, Marissa always included me in her life, meeting me where I was and supporting me. When I visited her in Atlanta, she handled everything to make sure that I was able to spend quality time with my Little Man and herself. She went out of her way to help make sure I was comfortable and able to access everything I needed. I felt such love from her in the many ways she gave of herself to me, her dad. Marissa encouraged me to come and watch my Little Man play in a basketball tournament May 14, 15 and 16th. I made a family trip out of it from May 11, 2021 through May 21, 2021.

Marissa was uniquely strong and assertive and part of her love for you could sometimes lead to her scolding you, holding you accountable for your actions. And while she would hold you accountable, she would not hold a grudge. As soon as you got the message, she would be right back to the more gentle expressions of her love. I always knew where I stood with Marissa and part of how she loved was kindly letting you know if you stepped out of line and guiding you back to your path. She will forever live in my spirit. I know that I will hear from her from time to time: "now Daddy, you know you should not have done/said that or don't do that"; do this instead, it will be better."

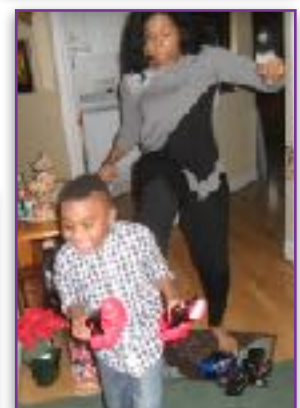
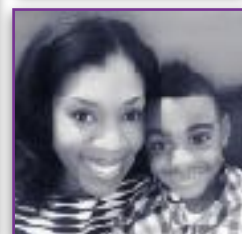
Marissa was always my final review for important documents and my resume. She would enhance and improve anything that I sought her counsel on, reducing and fine tuning my robust ramblings and capturing the truest essence of my message.

Marissa has had a strong connection with God since she was a little girl, has read the Bible from Genesis to Revelations more than once. I imagine she was working to fine tune God's message when the Lord let her know her time on earth was ending and that God needed her in his vineyard. I can hear her negotiating this point with God and even acknowledging my dad's deep love for me stated he would take my place and she suggested I be taken instead and God said no. I am at peace knowing God transitioned Marissa and has her. In fact, God is the only one who I can feel comfort having her since I no longer have her. There is simply no substitute for Marissa for us, and, apparently, there was no substitute for God either. He needed her at this moment in time.

I rest in God's word that all have been appointed a day and a time to transition from this world and have additional peace knowing Marissa and my mother are now sharing eternity together. When I last laid eyes on my precious daughter, she had a smile on her face. Her smile was beautiful, welcoming, infectious and I take comfort in knowing that her last negotiation with God went well. I believe she requested the opportunity to provide her "AJ," Paw Paw's Little Man, a cheat sheet to Glory also. I find peace knowing that as her spirit left, I was on an airplane flying back home to California after a 10-day visit with Marissa and her AJ (my "Little Man") in Atlanta. I sense that as she passed by my plane, she waved, and said, "Daddy, I am on my way to Glory, but I need you to take care of your Little Man until I see you both again."

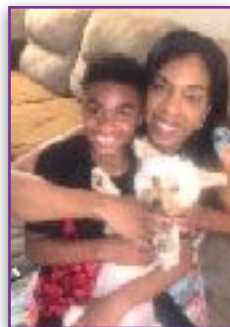
Whenever we spoke by phone or parted company, Marissa always said, "Bye, Daddy, I love you!" She always included that "Daddy." That was my signoff with my sweetheart, my Marissa and I will miss it – I will miss her – every single day.















My Sister / My Friend

As early as I can remember, Marissa was my protector and best friend, the person I looked up to for everything. As little girls, we fought and bickered, as sisters do, but it was never out of line or too aggressive and did not continue long into our lives. In fact, that sibling friction has long since faded away having made its last real appearance when I was in the sixth grade. Marissa was not my rival, she was my confidant and soulmate, always welcoming me into her friendships with others and never leaving me out. Marissa guided me in so many ways, teaching me everything from how to communicate my mind, lead with confidence, and carry myself with grace to how change clothes in a locker room while still preserving modesty and even the latest step team choreography once she settled onto the step team at Spelman. There was nothing she knew that should not teach me. Marissa poured her life into me from the start.

I loved playing basketball with Marissa. We played varsity ball together in high school – I was the starting point guard and she started at center. As the captain of the team her senior year, Marissa lead by example: hard work and a strong work ethic, traits she exhibited in every area of her life. I loved watching Marissa get rebound after rebound. I also loved how she lived the lessons she passed along to her teammates: if you're going to foul someone make them earn it at the free throw line and work hard and don't worry about everyone else because the rest will fall in line. Marissa's strong follow through, on and off the court, was remarkable, but on that court, her strength was more than physical. Her mental toughness and discipline were unparalleled and her commitment to the team to ensure victory was a guarantee, but she was always a lady. And, contrary to the typical bent among athletes for workout clothes as daily wear, Marissa avoided athleisure, always putting her best self forward commanding attention for her bold, classy style. Oh, and, Christmas included basketball too with annual season tickets for Marissa's beloved Lakers and unwavering enthusiasm for Kobe Bryant. In 2009, with AJ in utero, the Staples Center jumbotron displayed, "Merry Christmas, AJ, this is your first basketball game!"

Marissa was not really one for talking on the phone with most people, but that is how we regularly connected once she left for college. Back then, we had to have calling cards with minutes on them, always certain to have enough to for each of us to simply chat about our day or offer words of encouragement and prayer when we needed a shoulder to cry on. As an adult, I found I wanted nothing more than to ensure Marissa was joyful, safe, and happy, in that order. I felt compelled to do all I could to make sure that her life was taken care of, so that she could go out into the world and make it better, without worry for anything. She made the world so much better. She made my world so much better and urged me to never let me lose sight of my own beauty and grace. I wish I could see myself as she did, she loved every one of my broken pieces. The Bible says that every good and perfect gift comes from God and Marissa was a gift to the world and a gift to me. I told her all the time, she was perfect, a perfect gift from God, and she birthed perfection in everything she set her mind to.

As adults, we took to the road. Girl trips were a chance for Marissa to indulge her inner risk taker and wild side while I, in a role reversal of sorts, became the cautious caretaker. We enjoyed everything from ziplining and ATV-riding in Cancun to a drag show and endless shopping in Las Vegas, anything that would bring joy, laughter, delight, and that infectious smile, to Marissa's face. In 2019, the ten-year anniversary of our grandmother's passing, Marissa had plans for an intricate tattoo of angel wings, but with too little time, we decided to mark their bodies with rawest truths of our sisterhood: my slightly bent arrow is captioned, "She keeps me wild" and Marissa's decidedly straight arrow reads, "She keeps me safe." We held each other up in good times, bad times, and all of the in between times and would tell anyone who would listen, "My sister is better than yours." "#MSIBTY" was our next planned tattoo. So, to everybody reading these words, remember, my sister is better than yours.



Danisha





Spelman Sisters

To many, Marissa was a fierce advocate for social justice who knew no limits. But to me, she was so much more. A devoted and loyal friend, and just an overall good person. I first met Marissa at an event in California for rising freshman attending college in the Atlanta University Center in the fall. There was an instant connection, and we made sure to reconnect once we arrived on Spelman's campus. To say we were inseparable is an understatement - wherever you saw her, you saw me, and vice versa. We were a package deal - so much so that we were always the third wheel on each other's first dates. Our friendship grew over the years, and I often referred to her as my BFF turned sister, because that is what I came to know her as - the (slightly) older sister I always wanted. And the fact that I got to choose her was the icing on the cake. The loyalty and passion that she portrayed in her work, she also displayed in her friendships. Whenever I needed her, she was there. Even when I didn't know I needed her, she was there. She was that friend that you could call for anything. She would be there at the drop of a dime, no questions asked. I know that everyone doesn't get to experience true friendship, so I am beyond grateful that the Lord thought enough of me to share her with me as one of my closest and dearest friends. While I deeply mourn the loss of her physical presence, I am comforted by the many great memories that we shared. I rest in knowing that her spirit will always be with me, and that she will be watching over me from heaven, wearing the fanciest purple halo that Heaven ever did see. "I am better for knowing you, better for loving you, better for having met you. May you be as blessed in the next life, my friend, as I was in this one by knowing you." Rest well my friend, you deserve it. - *Dominique' Harbour*

On behalf of your Spelman Sisters, your memory will live in our hearts.
We are bound by a sacred sisterhood. Heaven has truly gained a phenomenal angel,
We love you Marissa.

Alexandria Jenkins, Carla Mashack, and Danielle Insignares.

I was in great admiration and awe the very first time I saw Marissa, commanding the room with her knowledge and brilliance. Referencing policy codes, language, and other states laws for Justice Boggs as he confidently trusted in her words as he made decisions on bail bonds. I had to meet her.

After meeting, we discovered we were Virgos, 3 days apart, Spelman Sisters, had a passion for social justice change, and many other commonalities. We shared many strategy lunches, long days and big wins at the State Capitol, conferences all over the country, and concerts in the park. We were powerful synergy personally and professionally. You educated me and supported me through the passing of HB345, which solidified the start of many collaborations. You're always the first to view my legislation because I trusted and valued your opinion.

Sis, I will cherish the laughs and good times we shared. I will harness your knowledge and leadership that you poured into me. I will channel your spirit to uplift your memory through my work in the movement. Most importantly, I'm grateful for you, miss you, and love you...Always

On behalf of RestoreHER, thank you for your voice, input, and support. Your presence will continue to be felt by advocates and allies across the criminal justice reform movement.

Pamela Winn, RestoreHER US.America

Reflections from Sara J. Totonchi, Executive Director Southern Center for Human Rights

Marissa McCall came into my life like a gorgeous purple shooting star. When she was a young lawyer, her passion, vision, and optimism during a time in which there was little to be hopeful for with criminal legal reform in Georgia was moving and infectious. She grew quickly into a force to be reckoned with. It was a tremendous honor to hire her in 2016 to be the Public Policy Director of the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR).

Marissa's impact on the work of SCHR is extraordinary. Her political acumen, irresistible personality, and unshakable and effective advocacy launched SCHR's policy efforts into the national sphere, bringing acclaim and hugely necessary resources into Georgia. She built a robust, dynamic, and effective policy practice within our office and was the go-to changemaker for so many people and organizations across the state. Even in incredibly tough and unfriendly rooms, she did not mince words or pull punches as she fought for and alongside people whose lives had been harmed by racial injustice and mass incarceration. No one can do like Marissa did.

On a personal level, Marissa was one of my dearest friends. I treasure now more than ever the time we spent together, swapping stories and advice on our shared journeys as moms of beautiful boys, gossiping about politicians, exchanging "healthy" recipes, and debating all the issues of the moment, both profound and mundane. One of the many things I loved about Marissa that she never held back with me, was always honest with me, and held me accountable as a sister-leader alongside her. And she was one of the most generous people I have ever known, always asking about my loved ones, giving incredibly thoughtful gifts, and even sharing her sweet dog, Peanut, with us.

Marissa's light burned so brightly, illuminating the path forward. Her sheer brilliance and boundless passion transformed everyone she met and every room she entered. The community she leaves behind is massive, diverse, and vibrant because her impact was so profound and wide-reaching.

In Marissa's honor, I invite all who read this to join me in rededicating ourselves to the struggle for justice, love, and liberation. May we build upon Marissa's abundant legacy and ensure she is part of our future.

Dr. Spence, Spelman Social Justice

The Spelman College Social Justice Program is deeply saddened by the loss of Social Justice Advocate Marissa McCall. C'05. Marissa epitomized the Spelman woman we refer to when we say, "Spelman women make a choice to change the world." We called upon Marissa often to speak with the Spelman College Social Justice Community. Her generous spirit and undaunted commitment to criminal justice reform was an exemplar for all she encountered. She believed that all persons must be treated with equity and justice. Marissa was a Social Justice warrior who was called away much too soon. It will be her spirit, work, and example that we will continue to lift to the Spelman College Social Justice Community.

Reflections on Marissa as a friend Atteeyah

Making friends as an adult is hard. With age, we become more guarded, more self-consciousness, more pessimistic about bringing new people into our lives. But as in so many of other areas of her life, Marissa was not your average friend.

I came to know Marissa about halfway through my career as an attorney, and years into Marissa's outstanding career in legal and policy advocacy. We initially bonded because we're both from California and are the proud mothers of lovely black boys. But I soon learned that Marissa truly epitomized what it means to be a friend.

To say she was supportive is an understatement. Besides my parents and husband, Marissa was one of my biggest cheerleaders. She simply would not sit by and watch the people she loved settle for less or not strive for new heights. I honestly don't think I would have had the courage to embark on new opportunities in my own career were it not for Marissa's unceasing encouragement and desire to see me thrive (even when I thought I couldn't).

Though Marissa was encouraging, she had an almost physical aversion to sugar coating the truth. There were many times when I'd bite my tongue, and Marissa would not. Perhaps I found some comfort knowing she would be courageous when I was too afraid to use my voice. I came across a quote that drove home the vital role of truth in relationships: "honesty is a very expensive gift. Don't expect it from cheap people." Marissa embodied truth, and you came to expect nothing else from her because she believed in her truth, and she trusted your ability to hear it.

Marissa and I were not childhood friends, but I felt like we'd known each other for years, and I consider her a lifelong friend. She was also my counselor, therapist, life coach, and inspiration. Her sudden passing has been painful beyond measure. But we owe it to ourselves to honor her life and legacy. To cherish the many memories of Marissa's fearlessness, selflessness, and sheer love for those around her. To not shrink from our power. And to be fierce in our love for one another, and in our truth.

Reflections on Marissa

From Mazie Lynn Causey

About one of her characters, author Anna Solomon writes, “She was a private person, your mother. She was the kind of private person who wears a face that makes her seem like a public person.” This reminds me of Marissa. Marissa was the kind of woman whose heart was so open to the world that even people who met her only once felt seen, heard, and connected to her in a way that is unique, rare, and, indeed, precious. By far one of the most emotionally intelligent souls I have ever known, Marissa brought a depth of insight and wisdom to every interaction, and this served her well in each facet of her life whether personal, professional, or civic. The fact is, that it served me well too on the many days when I needed a sounding board or encouraging word and could take my thoughts and struggles to her for advice. She was, very practically, my emergency contact on every form my children’s schools and camps required because, she was, very personally, my emergency contact for life, relationships, work, and parenting. I will always hold in my heart and mind, her encouragement to not only lavish love on my littles, but also considerately prune them as I would bonsai trees. I’ll never see a bonsai and not think of her. And speaking of lavishing love on my littles, that was grace Marissa offered in abundance and it was all reward for me to witness the beauty she brought out of them that only she could. Days at playgrounds and parks with Marissa, AJ and my children were some of the best days. It is a deep joy that my children knew the unconditional love that she offered them and a deep grief that she will not be among the safe, caring adults they can lean on as they journey through life.

I know many others have this same experience of thinking of the time they shared with Marissa as some of their best days. Marissa seemed to be able to multiply time as if she never ran out of that limited resource. Having shared many a late (late!) night conversation with her, I know her efficient time management was not all easy or without sacrifice, but I also know that each sacrificial decision she made about how to invest her time was made deliberately and lovingly, without grudge. This was especially true as she devoted herself to AJ and the ways that she fiercely guarded her relationship and time with him.

I am certainly a better person, a better friend, colleague, and mother because of the investments Marissa made in my life and I know I am but one voice among many who feel that way about our beloved friend. Rest in power, Lady. I love you so.

“I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.”

Alice Walker, The Color Purple

PURPLE WAS MARISSA’S FAVORITE COLOR, AND EVERYONE WHO KNEW HER KNEW IT. AS OFTEN AS SHE COULD SHE WORE PURPLE CLOTHES, PAINTED HER NAILS PURPLE, AND EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE ADDED PURPLE TO HER BRAIDS. THE COLOR PURPLE IS REGAL AND GRACEFUL, BOLD AND PROUD. THE COLOR PURPLE NEVER FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND; IT SHINES EVEN UNINTENTIONALLY. I NEVER ASKED MARISSA WHY PURPLE WAS HER FAVORITE COLOR, BUT AS I REFLECT ON THE SYMBOLISM OF THE COLOR, I SEE THAT THE COLOR PURPLE SYMBOLIZES MARISSA, TOO.

MARISSA WAS REGAL. MARISSA WAS NOT A PERSON WHO COULD WALK INTO A ROOM AND GO UNNOTICED, EVEN IF SHE TRIED, AND IT WASN’T JUST BECAUSE SHE WAS TALLER THAN MANY. THE WAY SHE CARRIED HERSELF COMMANDED ATTENTION AND RESPECT. I DON’T KNOW IF I EVER SAW HER PHYSICALLY STOOP. HER BACK DIDN’T BEND UNLESS IT WAS TO LIFT SOMEONE ELSE UP, AND SHE GAVE SO MUCH OF HERSELF TO UPLIFT OTHERS.

MARISSA WAS GRACEFUL. I WAS ALWAYS IN AWE OF HER ABILITY TO TELL YOU ABOUT YOURSELF IN SUCH A WAY THAT MADE YOU WANT TO THANK HER FOR TELLING YOU OFF.

YOU JUST COULDN’T HELP FEELING BETTER EDUCATED AFTER MARISSA GOT FINISHED WITH YOU.

MARISSA WAS BOLD. SHE WASN’T ONE TO ENJOY FOLLOWING RULES. SHE LIKED TO MAKE HER OWN WAY AND DO THINGS ON HER OWN TERMS. SHE WAS A RISK-TAKER, AND WE ARE ALL BENEFICIARIES OF HER UNWILLINGNESS TO TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER OR ACCEPT LIMITS ON HER VISION.

LIKE THE COLOR PURPLE, MARISSA BROUGHT BEAUTY AND LIGHT TO THIS WORLD. MARISSA’S ALMOST UNBELIEVABLY PERFECT SMILE REFLECTED SO MUCH LIGHT, AND IT IS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT I WILL MOST FONDLY REMEMBER ABOUT HER. WHETHER I SAW HER BEAUTIFUL SMILE AS SHE TEASED ME ABOUT A CERTAIN LIBATION THAT ENCOURAGED ME REVEAL TOO MANY OF MY SECRETS ONE NIGHT AT DINNER OR WHETHER SHE SMILED AS SHE BEAMED WITH PRIDE TELLING STORIES ABOUT AJ, I ALWAYS FELT BETTER AFTER SEEING MARISSA SMILE.

GOD ENDEAVORED TO PLEASE US BY SHARING MARISSA, IF FOR ONLY A SHORT TIME, AND I WILL BE FOREVER THANKFUL TO HAVE BEEN BLESSED BY HER FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, AND SUPPORT.

TERRICA REDFIELD GANZY

SisterCARE Alliance National

sistercarealliance@gmail.com

sistercarealliance.org

Self Care is Social Justice

Social Justice is Self Care

It is very difficult to reflect on Marissa because I wish she was still here. There are stories of ancestors we retell to celebrate what was great and impactful about them. The challenge in reflecting about Marissa is words fail any attempt to recreate how she walked in a room, measured her interactions enough to hold her power and uplift others at the same time and just loved on AJ. I can only think of what now best yanks the right feelings out of us when we want to honor someone we want to feel be next to and just watch shine one more time and that is through song. Marissa was not one to show her soft underbelly and quiet concerns easily. So, when we began to gather privately with other sisters in the social justice world as the "Justice Bae" secret group, I truly felt honored every time she arrived. Before she spoke you could almost see her thoughts moving, taking shape and then being delivered with a majesty that is more than memorable. While pouring bounds of intelligence, leadership and care for our people on every piece of policy she authored or improved, Marissa also gave good sincere hugs. Marissa enhanced others' works privately and never desired public attention for it. Marissa could see what was unsure in the heart of her sisters then provide comfort and support that made you feel like you could keep going. She not only loved you, she set an example for each and every sister in social justice work who wanted to bring a majestic brush stroke to this really brutal work of freeing our people. I am still through my memories of her organizing, Thought Leader impact and our Justice Bae meetings... taking notes. The only version of a song that comes to mind to paint a small picture of who she was for us in this work, is sung by Cassandra Wilson, Tupelo Honey.. "You can take all the tea in China, put it in a big brown bag for me, sail around all the seven oceans, drop it in the deep blue sea. 'She's' as sweet as tupelo honey. She's an angel of the first degree. She's as sweet as tupelo honey, just like the honey from the bee. You can't stop us on the road to freedom. You can't stop us cause our eyes can see..."

Marissa made the rough, brutal, unforgiving on black women's spirits, seas of social justice work sweeter. Just to have her by your side while working on behalf of our people was like medicine and a blessing. She will be sorely missed.

Expression of Gratitude

Words cannot express our gratitude for the many kindnesses you have evidenced by your cards, telegrams, gifts, flowers, and presence here today! We are grateful to everyone for your wonderful expressions of love during this very difficult period for us. We have lost a major pillar in our family; one whose shoes cannot be filled. We pray that God will give continued strength to our entire family to endure this great loss and allow His joy to tarry with us. It is further our prayer that this Homegoing Celebration has been all that "Marissa McCall Dodson" desired as she neared the coming of this day.

May God bless you and yours always.

*Humbly Submitted,
Arion D. Dodson Jr. (AJ):
David, Katholeen, and Danisha*

Mortuary in Charge

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