Madame C.J. Walker

Pre-reading

Questions:
• What do you know about this woman?

Definitions:
• Widow – a woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried
• Literate – able to read and write

Reading

Madame C.J. Walker became the United States’ first woman millionaire. This was quite an accomplishment for any woman of her time, white or black, but especially for a woman born into her circumstances. She was born Sarah Breedlove, in 1867. Her parents, former slaves, were sharecroppers on a cotton plantation.

When she was six, Sarah was orphaned. She went to live with her older sister and her husband. She was worked very hard. She lived in poverty and had little education. She got married at the young age of fourteen and had a daughter when she was eighteen. When she was twenty, Sarah became a widow.

She worked long hours as a laundress and a house cleaner. She made sure her daughter went to school, and even put her through college. Sarah, who was barely literate, was very proud of her daughter’s educational accomplishments.

In her late thirties, Sarah suffered from hair loss due to stress and damage from hair care products. Many black women had hair problems because of poor nutrition and lack of running water. They also had damage from hair straighteners that attempted to make their hair similar to that of white women.

Frustrated with the poor condition of her hair, Sarah began to invent hair care products. She developed one that caused her hair to grow quickly and thickly. Friends and family noticed the change in her hair. They asked for her hair care product. Sarah knew she had a product that would benefit many black women. She began selling her product to family and friends, and marketing it door-to-door.

After her marriage to businessman C.J. Walker, Sarah adopted the name Madame C.J. Walker. She developed a growing number of hair care products. Working closely with her daughter, her business grew and grew. A modern factory was built to produce the hair care products.

Walker traveled throughout the nation teaching hair care methods and demonstrating her products. She also recruited and trained thousands of black women to be her selling agents. At one time, Walker had over 3,000 agents working for her. By 1914 she had grossed over one million dollars.

At the 1914 convention of the National Negro Business League, Walker said, “I am not merely satisfied in making money for myself….I want to provide employment for hundreds of women of my race. I had little or no opportunity when I started out in life…I had to make my own living and my own opportunity! But I made it! That is why I want to say to every Negro woman present, don’t sit down and wait for opportunities to come….Get up and make them!”

Walker died on May 25, 1919, at the age of 51. She did not heed doctors’ warnings to slow down her fast-paced life. In her life and in her death Walker generously supported many organizations. One of the main recipients was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
Understanding

1. What kind of odds did Madame C.J. Walker have to overcome in order to be successful? __________
   __________________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

2. How did she share her success with others? ________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

3. Why was she so proud of her daughter? ___________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

4. Who or what is a recipient? _____________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

5. Summarize Walker's words at the National Negro Business League in one or two sentences (in your
   own words). _____________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

6. What does the word opportunity mean? _________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

7. Who were the main consumers of her products? Why? _____________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

8. Define the word accomplishment. _______________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________________

Writing

Option A: Summarize the story in your own words.

Option B: Write about a goal you really want to accomplish in your life. How could others be affected
by what you do?

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___________________________________________________________________________________
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