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Gwen Love:

A LEGACY OF CARING

GWEN LOVE lives up to her name every day.

Love, who took her husband's descriptive last name as an 18-year-old bride, is the executive director of Lunch Break, the soup kitchen and social service agency in Red Bank that has been a lifeline to so many during the past 31 years.

Though she has only been the head of the agency since 2008, her ability to work for the betterment of others has its roots firmly planted through the example of her mother, Beulah Mae Maultsby.

Love, 56, initially didn't realize it until her brothers and sisters told her, but she is very much her mother's daughter, continuing a legacy of caring.

A strong outspoken Southern woman, Love's mother spent her life working to help her family and others in the community. She was an organizer. Among her various endeavors, she "packed people on the bus" for the March on Washington in 1963. Her dream was to own her own home; she bought hers at age 60.

"Against all odds, my mother was a hardworking woman. She didn't take or make excuses," Love said. "At the same time, my mother was also very much an advocate for people in the community, helping people. So, I think ... me - and all of my siblings - have taken on our mother's work ethic and drive ... Mommy would have been proud. That makes me feel wonderful."

Born in Lumberton, N.C., Love was 5 years old when her mother followed through on her plan to leave her husband. While he was at work, she left, taking her children and heading north by train to her cousin's home in Perth Amboy. Eventually, the Maultsby family moved into public housing in Perth Amboy and, when living there got rougher, they moved to Freehold Borough.

The family needed social services for a time. "I knew what it was like to go to the store with my mom and have her pull out food stamps," Love said. "But, she was the type of person who wanted more and she kept going and going ... Eventually, she was in a program that allowed her to work her way out of the social service system."

It was in Freehold as a 17-year-old that Love met her husband, Milton Love. She was working after school in a Laundromat when he came in to pick up his sister. He used his last name "as his thing. He introduced himself as 'Love' and I was like, yeah, right. Then he pulled his driver's license out," she said. They married the following year. "We are still sweethearts today," she said with a smile.

Their first child was born a few months after their wedding and by the time Love was 23, she and Milton had their four children.

"I really understand the struggles of young people and families. It's not easy. If it were not for my family and his family being family-oriented people and people who realized that that's what it takes ... It's easier to rally around your family than see them sink. Our families were a blessing to us as we were raising our children. When we needed help ... they helped."

Love describes her husband as "hard working with a strong work

ethic." It's a description that fits her as well. Even as a stay-at-home mom for a few short years when her children were very young, she continued to work, taking on such jobs as selling Avon products, babysitting other's children and cleaning houses. "I did what needed to be done to help our family," she said.

But being a mom and working hard to help support the family wasn't enough for Love. She had left high school when she got pregnant but always wanted her diploma. Shortly before her fourth pregnancy, she enrolled as a student in night school in Neptune Township. Though she was discouraged when she found she was pregnant again "and trying to do something for myself," Milton encouraged her to continue her studies, promising that he and others would be at home taking care of the kids at night when she went to school.

"It was a proud day for me when I got to walk on stage ... It was a dream," she said. "I could never see myself without a diploma, it's the minimum of education you should have. All along I kept saying I wasn't a whole person without a diploma."

Love has photos of herself and her family - husband, kids, mother, brothers "and everybody" - supporting her that day, including her youngest child and only girl, who was only a few weeks old and whom she cradled in her arms.

While Love was proud that day, again "it wasn't enough." As a youngster she had hopes of graduating from high school, going on to a historical black college "and become a college campus queen.

"All that didn't happen but that's OK," she said. "You have choices and some of the choices I made led me away from all that."

So, when her daughter was in school full time, she enrolled at Stuart School of Business. She completed the executive secretarial program and was asked to stay on as the secretary to the school's director. She worked there for about two years and then went to work, first for the planning department in Neptune Township, then the planning and zoning department.

She was an administrative officer for the township for 16 years, the last five in the state-sponsored Neighborhood Empowerment Program. It was there she got her feet wet, working among the people to define neighborhood problems and find workable solutions. "The goal was to go out into the community where there was no real empowered group of people and create a structure that would last beyond the (five-year) program," Love said.

"We had a lot of community meetings, a lot of community dinners, a lot of surveys in the community to see what the needs were," she said. "It was hard work ... It was a lot to get people to trust you, to hear all the complaints and get to the issues we could work on.

"It was a turning point in my life," she said.

When she entered the program, she was guaranteed her old job in planning and zoning. But, the community work struck a chord and it was "different" for her. "It was very grassroots and I just loved it.

"It was an amazing, great experience for me that ignited - like my mother - something in me that I honestly didn't know was there. It was

reaching people at a different level."

When she went back to the township office, it didn't feel right. "I told my husband this isn't doing it for me anymore. I need to be around the people," she said.

The Loves prayed on the decision they were making - "a huge leap of faith." She went from making a salary to no salary at all, from providing her family with benefits to no benefits.

Then someone she knew from the Affordable Housing Alliance reached out to her about a position and she took a job, first as an executive assistant, then as director of administration. "It was an amazing experience ... and I learned a lot," she said, but she missed "being with the people.

"Then one day, you know those little free papers that are thrown on the driveway? I usually threw them away but one day before going to work, I just happened to look through and saw a little ad ... that Lunch Break was hiring an executive director and I thought, 'Wow,'" said Love, who still has that advertisement.

"That was it. I ended up here" in 2008.

"This has been a blessing in so many ways ... It's a blend of administration but also being around the people, being involved and seeing and knowing what the concerns are. At the same time you are seeing the transformation of people from when they first come in with broken spirits and many issues ... You get to see their transformation through the work that we are all doing in their lives," she said. "It truly takes a village.

"Between the volunteers we have, the staff, the board members and the community wrapping their arms around what Lunch Break is doing, we are able to touch so many lives and help so many people."

Lunch Break, which works to alleviate hunger, also strives to help its clients gain self-sufficiency and healthier lifestyles with compassion and dignity.

Last year alone, Lunch Break served 61,000 meals in its soup kitchen. The food pantry serves between 600

and 700 families a month. Countless people take advantage of the clothes, blankets and household the agency distributes. There is also a program to send food to the homebound. The reach of Lunch Break goes way beyond Red Bank into parts of Ocean and Middlesex counties and even to Newark.

"There are so many ways we are reaching the community," Love said.

"I don't really call this a job," Love said. "This is a mission that you get back as much as you give because it makes you feel so wonderful and blessed yourself that you can help so many people.

"I want my legacy to be that we help people become self-sufficient ... to not give up," Love said. "Regardless of what we go through, you got to keep putting one foot in front of another."

It's the perfect mission for one named Love.

By Michele J. Kuhn



DANNY SANCHEZ