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Marta Perez: The day I met Maya Angelou

Marta Perez

[Miami Dade School Board Member](#)



MIAMI HERALD STAFF
2005: Photograph taken the day Miami Dade School Board member Marta Perez met the late Maya Angelou at the 12th Annual 5000 Role Models of Excellence Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Unity Scholarship breakfast. Standing between them is the unidentified boy Perez introduced to Angelou, who died last week.

As time passes, people who impressed us in our youth, and who we associated with immortality, suddenly die. It astonishes us because they were so vibrant in our thoughts. It causes us to reminisce of happy memories associated with them. Such is the case with the passing this week of Maya Angelou.

Long before I had the pleasure of meeting her, my sister Mary and I were Ms. Angelou's fans—especially of her poetry. It may seem unusual that two Cuban school girls would identify with someone who many associate with the Civil Rights movement, but Maya Angelou was so much more than that.

She was an American author and poet of incredible charm and power. Her word mesmerized. We saw her on television and heard her interviews on the radio. Because she was a great orator, she was often a speaker at college graduations. It is graduation season now, and so many of us are asked to speak... but Maya Angelou always delivered something extra. She could inspire young minds to aspire to the top and to believe in themselves, no matter who they were or their circumstances.

Part of her magic may have been that she was all-encompassing. She believed all of us were deserving. To Mary and me she spoke about the dignity of womanhood, even if you were not quite beautiful or perfect as so many ads encourage young women to be. I would get goose bumps reading "Phenomenal Woman."

Like many of the Civil Rights heroes of that generation, she gave her time and energy tirelessly to the cause. She was a principled human being who provided a soothing sense of stability to the movement. "And Still I rise" is a testament to this.

She believed in mutual respect and consideration. This message rang when she delivered her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's first inaugural. It asks for inclusion of those traditionally marginalized by society.

About thirteen years ago, I was invited to a 500 Role Model breakfast where she was the guest speaker. I was so excited to see this favored legend. Because I was then a School Board member, my seat at the head table which gave me the advantage of greeting Ms. Angelou before some of the other attendees. I noticed a young boy at a corner of the room whose eyes sparkled just looking at her from a distance. I asked him, "Do you want to meet Maya Angelou?"

He responded with an emphatic, "Yes."

I took him with me to see the famous Maya Angelou. She was as thrilled to speak to us—especially, the young lad—as we were to come within her aura. The room was electric with excitement. She made kind remarks during the seconds we were in her glow. He and I walked away knowing we had met someone unforgettable.

It is so shocking to hear that this bigger than life woman has died. We owe her gratitude for so much pleasure her work and presence gave and continues to give humanity.

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