

Thomas A. McRae

63 Haverhill Way
San Antonio, Texas 78209

April 13, 2021

Dr. Marjorie Hass
President, Rhodes College

Dear Dr. Hass,

As a former Memphian, I occasionally check-in on what's going on there. Recently, while winding my way through the internet, I stumbled across an article by Annie Deal entitled:

"Elegance Meets Functionality in Rhodes College's President's Home" [published online at styleblueprint.com]

It's a fascinating piece and the author does a great job of capturing the essence of the recent redecorating project for the President's home. That's not the reason I'm writing you.

I'm writing you because I was completely amazed by the following portion of the story:

'Marjorie's sunroom is exemplary of this balance. Rachel used a palette of nuanced, muted reds in this room to incorporate the signature Rhodes color in a more subdued tone. "I wanted to provide her with a setting opposite of the Gothic-influenced architecture of Rhodes' campus," says Rachel, "a sort of reflection of her personal work-life balance." Here, Marjorie can have a moment to herself to "curl up and read in a light and airy space," Rachel says, while still feeling connected to Rhodes. Also found in this room is a painting by Mary Sims that illustrates a woman with crossed arms over a pot of geraniums. Rachel sees this piece as an essential to the room as a reminder that, as she puts it, "The woman in the piece is a badass much like President Hass.'

The woman in the painting is my mother, Louise Howry McRae. First, let me say that I am neither complaining about nor disagreeing with the characterization of her as a badass. She was. Next, I'll state unequivocally that she would be thrilled that Rhodes is using her portrait in the President's home, even more so because it was placed there on the occasion of the arrival of Rhodes' first woman President. I should add that she would truly approve of the idea of curling up to read a book in the sunroom. Finally, she would **LOVE** being called a badass.

For your reference here's a bit about her: Louise Howry McRae (those were all of her names, she was not given a middle name) was born in Coffeenville, Mississippi on May the 29th 1922. Her family moved to Memphis when she was 3 years old. Her father's family were planters, lawyers and judges in Mississippi—her great grandfather, Judge James M. Howry, was one of the founders of the University of Mississippi. Her mother's family (the Armstrongs) were successful merchants and lawyers [there is a rare book collection at Rhodes donated by her first cousin Walter P. Armstrong, a prominent Memphis attorney].

April 13, 2021

Her mother's family valued education greatly; she was very proud that she was in the third generation of women on her mother's side of the family to graduate from college.

Louise graduated from Snowden School and Central High (class of 1939). She attended Rhodes (which was, of course, known then as Southwestern) from 1939 to 1943, when she graduated with honors in History. While she excelled in her academic pursuits, she was also very active in many other facets of life at Southwestern: she was co-editor of the Sou'wester and was named "Most Stylish Co-ed" and "Miss Southwestern" She dearly loved Rhodes and was quite proud of her degree from there, you'll find that she established a Fine Arts scholarship as part of her estate plan.

Family lore says she was offered a graduate fellowship to study History at the University of Chicago following her graduation but she and my father married in July of 1943 and she elected to move around as a Navy wife during wartime. After the war, my parents settled in Memphis. My mother never really worked outside the home in a paid job (she was a mother of four), but she was extremely active in the Memphis community from the Junior League to reading to children to serving on numerous boards. She was very proud to serve as the first woman member of the Memphis and Shelby County Planning Commission.

My mother was a founder of the Dyslexia Foundation of Memphis—that was pretty badass; when she was told that the public schools had no help for my brother Duncan's dyslexia, she researched what it was, found the leading expert in the country, met with him and came back and established (with others) a foundation to offer tutoring to junior high age students with dyslexia [it still operates today].

She was (especially for her time) an early supporter of racial equality—I can remember as a child (sometime in the mid-60s) being taken to an integrated picnic in a park downtown; that was an incredibly big deal and there was plenty of security. While my father was later known for his efforts to advance racial equality, I'm pretty certain that attending the picnic was my mother's idea.

My mother didn't shrink from any challenge and was wasn't afraid of much. She didn't like unfairness or people who were arrogant and she couldn't abide being talked down too.

The Portrait

My mother loved art and she had a small but wonderful collection of works by local artists:, Carroll Cloar, Burton Callicot and others.

The portrait you have in your sunroom was commissioned by my dad (I think for my mother's birthday). The artist, Mary Sims, was the daughter of a friend of my parents, Lydel Sims [who was a columnist for the Commercial Appeal], --she was (at the time) an up and coming, and perhaps somewhat edgy, artist.

My mother did sit for the portrait, but truth be told, I think she and my dad were a bit taken aback when it arrived. We were all a bit afraid of it; the eyes seemed to us to sort of follow you around the room. For many years the portrait was on the dining room wall of parents' condominium unit at Woodlands. My father had a great deal of fun with it. For example, when I brought my finance (now my wife) home to meet my parents for the first time my father waited until we were all seated at the dinner table and then asked her "what do you think of Louise's portrait" [as a side note, my wife can handle herself very well; she responded with "I think she looks even better in person"].

April 13, 2021

When my mother died, as my father prepared to move to smaller quarters we really didn't know what to do about the portrait. We had the inspiration to give the portrait to Rhodes. I have to confess that we called the college, spoke to someone in the Art Department and explained that that we had a painting by Mary Sims that we wanted to donate. The folks in the Art Department were thrilled. The student working the desk at library (our agreed drop-off point) might have been a little more scared than thrilled.

I know my mother would be honored to be watching over the President of Rhodes. I can assure you that if those eyes seem to be following you around the sunroom, you are being watched over by a kindred spirit.

All the best.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas A. (Tock) McRae". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "T" and "M".

Thomas A. (Tock) McRae

P.S. I attached to the email sending this letter a copy of my mother's obituary from the Commercial Appeal. I hope that this information can remain associated with the portrait so that over time, people will know who that badass woman was.