



MELBAH SMITH

Retired Executive Director of the Mississippi Center for Cooperative Development and Director of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives. Smith worked for nearly 40 years as a trusted co-op developer in some of the most impoverished areas of the country. Her visionary leadership and hands-on, grassroots approach to building communities have helped bring health care, economic development, and social justice to people in need through the cooperative model.

MAC Executive Director Retires after 36 Years of Cooperation

Melbah McAfee Smith was born August 4, 1946, to Ector and Lucy McAfee in rural Rankin County, MS. Melbah got her first hand knowledge of life on the farm from her parents, her dad farmed on the forty acres of fruits, vegetables and livestock which included both cattle and swine. This life of hard work has resulted in a strong voice of advocacy for small farms, which Melbah loves. She has one sibling a brother, Dr Dalton McAfee, who shares her love for farming and agriculture.

In 1985, she married her husband Charles Smith, and they have one son, Peter.

In April 1972, Melbah was given the opportunity to work for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives as Director of Consumer Cooperatives at the Rural Training and Research Center at Epes, AL; thus beginning a career Alabama. There she was introduced to many men and women, who were working in their communities for social and economic equality; here she could make a difference. From 1972 to 1974, Melbah served as Director of the Black Belt Community Health Center, an effort by the Federation to provide health care services to the residents of north Sumter County. Through the Federation she could go to other places and observe how others lived and survived in rural areas.

From 1974 to 1977, Melbah served in a variety of capacities to enhance the Federation's Rural Training Center, including Comptroller of the organization. Working with the Federation afforded her the first opportunity to go to Washington D.C. and a chance to meet with congressional delegates and discuss the challenges that rural Alabama residents faced. She brought those experiences back to AL and eventually to MS and began to work in rural communities to organize people and help them realize what they could do affecting change. She realized they needed assistance, and through encouragement to work together to carry out day to day responsibilities they would have greater impact.

This began a career of over thirty years of cooperative development a pursuit of a vision that was both purposeful and rewarding. She has always recognized the power and potential of human resources in rural communities. Through her leadership she has identified leaders in other communities and encouraged them to join together and incorporate the cooperative model in their towns. Melbah believes community voices matter and are essential to economic growth and has engaged support from local land grant universities and department of agriculture and economic development, USDA and other agencies to hear these voices.

From 1978 to present, Melbah served as Coordinator and Program Director for the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives; sometimes serving as a volunteer working without payment, sometimes serving in conjunction with Alcorn State University Cooperative Extension Service and as co-coordinator with Ben Burkett. During this time she exemplified strong leadership ability

as she ran the day to day activities and served as overseer for the staff. Not only did she direct and lead the staff, but the cooperative membership relied heavily upon her ability as a cooperative developer, she would provide membership education and board training. Melbah never worked nine to five; she worked until she got the job done. This was carried out by attending endless hours of meetings, riding on tractors with the farmers, eating meals and long nights and working weekends. Which paid off, not only was she successful as a cooperator, she started lifelong relationships with these groups. There is an intuitiveness Melbah has when she comes in contact with groups. Once she has made an assessment she works hard with these groups to birth new businesses.

Later in 1997, she became executive Director of the MS Center for Cooperative Development. A cooperative developer and enthusiast, she has assisted with the formation of over 25 cooperatives in the state of MS, and development in the Virgin Islands, Post Katrina efforts that has taken her development expertise to the gulf coastal areas in Plaquemine, St Bernard and Orleans parishes in Louisiana.

In 1984, a group of rural community producers started a coop in Mashulaville, MS in Noxubee county, this was a group of 35 small farmers both men and women with a vision. Melbah embraced this vision and the co-op was formed, later a youth component was added and today over 150 small families are customers to this group. They are the Beat-4 farmers cooperative with the farmers market located on the hwy 45 bypass in Macon, MS. Today they are joined with the East Central Credit Union and assist not only the cooperative members but community residents.

Melbah is one of the founding members of the South Rankin County Farmers Cooperative in Star MS. She observed and saw the resources in her community and inquired of the residents to see if they wanted to pool them together to better serve their enterprises and after a succession of meetings, they became the cooperative they are today. Melbah currently farms on a small scale, squash, yellow and zucchini, bell peppers and egg plants. In 2005, She and a member of the SRCFC, joined forces to form C&S Farms.

Another of her most loved work was the Mileston Cooperative in Mileston, MS. She worked many hours with minority cotton producers to sustain their own cotton gin. After many meetings, their dream was realized, this cooperative was successful for many years, and minority producers were able to gin their cotton and get better prices. Until the death

of its founding board, the Mileston Gin continued to serve minority cotton producers in the Mileston and Tchula area. She fondly recalls visiting the cotton farmers who founded the cooperative, at their farms and how she would often get on tractors as they were working in the fields discussing issues and planning meetings.

To say Melbah is a visionary, does capture her essence, a strong woman of great faith, she challenges others to dream and to fulfill their dreams. It is because of her resolute belief that failure comes from refusal to try; she has helped so many people attain their dreams. The first thing one learns from Melbah is you must have a vision, and once you grasp it, you will stay with it. She has a passion for cooperatives that is evident in her presentations. Consistent advocacy on the behalf of underserved and low income farm families and rural residents has made Melbah a recognized agent for change in the cooperative world. Since the beginning of her career, her message has not altered, we must help to preserve rural communities, small farmers and their families, and there is no better way than the use of the cooperative model. This position has often fostered negative responses, but it caused Melbah to pursue greater, the cause of the poor.

Today, her passion remains as she works to bring affordable family housing to the Tchula, MS area. For over six years, the Mississippi Center for Cooperative Development has pursued this project. Tchula remains an economically poor and struggling community today. The housing would allow, at least twenty families the opportunity to live in safe and good quality homes.

Melbah has faithfully represented the Federation on the boards of Cooperation Works, Past President, member; Cooperative Development Foundation, member, board of directors; Rankin County Health Care, Board member; Rainbow Whole Food Cooperative, Past President, Board of Directors; SARE/ACE Administrative Council, Member; and Mississippi Valley State University Alumni Association, Member.

Although, Melbah formerly retires as an employee, her dedication and passion for “Change” in poor and economically oppressed communities will undoubtedly continue in another great work of advocacy. **A legacy of devotion and success**

