



A Toast to Norma Watkins

Delivered by Lisa Locascio at the MCWC 2019 Banquet

One of my favorite things about MCWC is that it is a matriarchy, and tonight I have the special responsibility of recognizing one of the elders who has brought us to where we are today. Since the beginning of my relationship with the Conference, which I first attended as a student in 2012, I have been inspired by Norma Watkins—by her writing, by her teaching, and by her person. Norma came to us from a place so different from where we sit tonight that it's fair to call it another world. Born in the early twentieth century into a family of hoteliers and lawyers in southern Mississippi, she grew up and moved in a universe that demanded complicity in its dehumanization of African-Americans, people present at all levels of society and in all contexts but silently, powerfully negated and diminished. In Norma's memoirs, *The Last Resort* and *That Woman From Mississippi*, we learn about the process of ethical discernment that brought her out of that silence and darkness and into the light of self-determination, at great personal cost. She is a woman who has put her ethics and values ahead of her own comfort all her life, and a distinguished educator whose expertise and generosity has edified thousands of people—students, writers, friends, and passing strangers. To me, Norma is a model of the kind of woman I hope to be: a whip-smart, vigorous, take-no-prisoners firebrand with an incredible sense of humor matched only by her incredible kindness. She and her husband Les Cizek have brought so much heart and devotion to MCWC through their years of service; they've done it all, from teaching and speaking on panels to setting up and breaking down events. It is my ambition to someday be as productive, selfless, and valuable to a community as Norma is to ours, and to all who know her. From the incendiary power of her writing to the irrepressible joy of her person, it is no overstatement to say that I, and so many others here tonight, owe our lives as writers on the Mendocino Coast to Norma Watkins. Please, let's give her a round of applause.