



## Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal

June 12, 1940 - December 15, 2022

\*\*\*\*A CELEBRATION OF LIFE SERVICES FOR MS. BERTHA LOUISE MCNEAL WILL BE HELD THURSDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2022 AT STONES CHURCH IN KALAMAZOO (DOORS OF THE CHURCH WILL BE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC AT 10:30 A.M.)

\*\*\*ATTENTION TO THOSE WHO WOULD LIKE TO VIEW SERVICES ONLINE YOU HAVE (3) OPTIONS TO CHOOSE FROM:

1. Go to Stone Church's website at: [stoneschurch.com](http://stoneschurch.com)

-Or-

2. Go to YouTube

-Or-

3. Go to Facebook, if you have a facebook account. after logging in, type in Stones Church

-Or-

4. Go To Stones Church Livestream

\*\*\*PLEASE SEE WALK THROUGH VISITATION INFORMATION FOR WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2022 LISTED BELOW\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*MASKS & SOCIAL DISTANCING WHEN ENTERING THE CHURCH---  
HAND SANITIZER WILL BE PROVIDED\*\*\*\*

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## The Obituary

Bertha (Barbee) McNeal was born in Shannon, Mississippi to Rome and Emergine (Harris) Barbee, the oldest of three children. The family moved to Flint when Bertha was a toddler. She confessed Christ at an early age and attended St. James C.M.E. church with her family. At the age of nine, Bertha began taking piano lessons and performed in many recitals. She began cultivating her passion for music and later graduated from Flint Central High School where she was a member of the girls' glee club. Bertha initially wanted to become a nurse, but quickly changed her mind after one day of a hospital internship.

Bertha along with her cousins Norma and Joyce joined their uncle Simon Barbee in forming the group "The Barbee's" They performed throughout the State of Michigan and recorded two songs "The Wind" and "Que Pasa." She naturally gravitated towards community, she was a member of The Flint Urban League and was a leader with Flint Mott Foundation. After spending two years at Flint Junior College (now Mott Community College), Bertha attended Western Michigan University. Bertha had originally aspired to be a composer and majored in music with an emphasis on piano. She would often hang out in the student union and play the grand piano while others enjoyed. She and friend Mildred (Gill) Arbor formed a singing group. They recruited Mildred's sister Caldin (Gill) Street, Bertha's cousin Norma (Barbee) Fairhurst and friend Betty Kelley. They performed at various soc hops including winning a talent contest on campus that caught the ear of Berry Gordy's nephew Robert Bullock who encouraged them to audition for Motown. After a snowy ride to Hitsville USA and being in the right place at the right time, the rest is history.

The Velvelettes became a part of Motown and recorded several songs including "There He Goes", "Needle In A Haystack", and "He Was Really Sayin' Somethin'." She toured with famed legends such as Dick Clark, Gladys

Knight and The Pips and The Supremes to name a few.

After a taste of fame, Bertha graduated with a bachelor's in music education. Bertha returned to Flint to teach while newly engaged. She and former spouse Earl McNeal settled in Kalamazoo for work and raising a family. She became mother of twins, Martin (Marty) and Melva.

Bertha's love of music led her to cultivate her passion for mentoring and teaching. She worked at Para-School Learning Center and would eventually obtain her master's degree in music education. She was the "Music Lady" on WKZO-TV Channel 3 Clubhouse for many years. She continued accompanying various singers on piano for events and was an active member of the Afro-American Community Chorale. In 1976 she joined forces with Edison Elementary as music teacher and choir director of 80 students. She then moved to Milwood Middle School in the early eighties as music educator and choir director to 130 students. She retired from Milwood in 2002.

She was known for her upbeat contemporary choir performances that challenged the status quo. She was a trailblazer in her own right. While teaching, Bertha continued to engage in the community and collaborated with like-minded friends and co-founded the Black Arts Festivals and Youth Festivals at Bronson Park. During her summers Bertha took classes towards her doctorate degree at Michigan State University. She became an active member of First United Baptist Church. She reunited with the Velvelettes in 1984 and performed at various events that included repeated performances in London. She performed with the Kalamazoo Gospel Chorus accompanied by the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra and worked on several committees along with serving as board member to many.

Bertha did not "retire" from her purpose when she retired from Kalamazoo

Public Schools in 2002. She devoted more time with her growing family that included her grandchildren Cydni and Spencer to whom she was affectionately known as “Bamma.” Bertha kept the momentum and joined the NAACP-ACT-SO (Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics) Committee as co-chair where she worked diligently recruiting, coaching, and motivating students to promote their creative talent in local and national competitions. She continued to perform with the Velvelettes with her most recent performance in July of this year for the Juneteenth celebration. She also began teaching private music lessons. She helped with summer music programs and vacation bible studies with Allen Chapel AME Church. Dedicated to her passion of community and teaching Bertha took on the position of artistic director and music instructor with the Helen L Fox Gospel Music Center where she inspired many lives especially that of young people. She actively fostered, mentored, and instructed children on several musical instruments and directed recitals. The pandemic did not stop her, she began instructing virtual Zoom teaching sessions with the students.

Bertha was known for giving heartfelt and thoughtful gifts. She was admired and adored by many. She aimed to please and empower others. She did not stray away from the mainstream. She was a social magnet and icon and was gentle but persistent when it came to her passions for music and teaching. She was a pillar of the community and thoroughly enjoyed life.

In her spare time, she enjoyed attending social events including plays, concerts and the like. She relaxed by watching home shopping networks, reading cookbooks and magazines, browsing the internet and ordering from catalogs.

She received countless awards and recognitions ranging from Golden Apple Award presented by WMU Alumni, Who’s Who Among American Women, Who’s Who Among American Teachers, recognized as one of the 100

Outstanding African American Men and Women in Kalamazoo and most recently received The Community Arts Award.

Bertha leaves to cherish her memory: daughter, Melva Payton, son, Martin McNeal, grandchildren Cydni and Spencer Payton, Aunt Amilee Troutman, nieces Malita, Kim, Kia, nephews Michael, Ovell Jr, Nya, Osai and Chike. She also leaves a host of cousins, family, and friends.

Bertha was preceded in death by her father Rome Barbee, mother Emergine (Harris) Barbee, brother Ovell Barbee, sister Melva Todd, brother-in-law James Todd, nephew Alan Hardwick Jr., son-in-law Darris Payton and cherished uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends.

# Cemetery Details

## Sunset Hills & River Rest Cemetery-Flint, MI

4413 Flushing Road  
Flint, MI

# Previous Events

## Walk Through Visitation For Family & Friends

DEC 28. 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

Stones Church  
1225 W. Paterson Street  
Kalamazoo, MI 49007

## Visitation

DEC 29. 10:30 AM - 11:00 AM (ET)

Stones Church  
1225 W. Paterson Street  
Kalamazoo, MI 49007

## A Celebration of Life

DEC 29. 11:00 AM (ET)

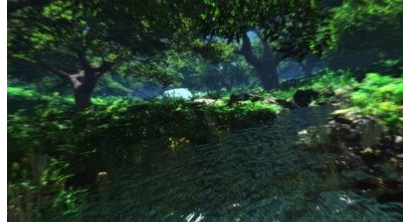
Stones Church  
1225 W. Paterson Street  
Kalamazoo, MI 49007



# Tribute Wall



“ Harper Funeral Home created a Tribute Video in memory of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal



Harper Funeral Home - December 27, 2022 at 11:46 AM

TB

*To the family of Berta .I've enjoyed calling myself a friend after many years bring a fan. I will always cherish the time I escorted the ladies around NYC back in the ninties.And always the lengthy conversations I shared with her. Rest in the glory of God my friend*

Thomas Di Bella - December 27, 2022 at 06:51 PM

TB

*The name is Di Bella*

Thomas Di Bella - December 27, 2022 at 06:51 PM

MJ

*Beautiful - well done! Rest in peace Bertha*

MYRTLE MARILYNN JEFFERSON - December 28, 2022 at 12:56 PM

DT

*I have been a fan of the Velvettes as a young teen. I had the opportunity to work with Bert at the Para Learning Center. I was elated to be in her presence to sing with her and call her friend! Rest in peace! Love*

Denise Tyiska

Denise Tyiska - December 31, 2022 at 12:49 PM

CK

*The best music teacher I ever Had I love You Mrs McNeal you will be greatly missed 🥹🥹*

ceira kye - January 15, 2023 at 12:56 PM



“ *Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal*

October 23, 2023 at 06:06 AM



“ *Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal*

October 06, 2023 at 10:42 AM

DC

“ *Donald Cain lit a candle in memory of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal*



Donald Cain - January 10, 2023 at 03:46 AM

NH

“ *Neal, Barb Higgins sent a virtual gift in memory of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal*



Neal, Barb Higgins - January 06, 2023 at 10:04 AM



“ *Condolences to the family of Bertha McNeal! Bertha was a sweet spirited person who always exhibited a pleasant and God felt aura when communicating. We pray for the family's peace and comfort as they go through bereavement.*

*John & Carolyn Davis*

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**John Davis Sr.** - January 04, 2023 at 07:40 PM

WS

“ *My deepest condolence to the family! Wesley Singleton Aiken South Carolina*

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**Wesley Singleton** - December 31, 2022 at 12:11 PM

PF

“ *Patterson Family lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Patterson Family** - December 30, 2022 at 07:43 PM

TF

“ *The Family lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**The Chambers Family** - December 29, 2022 at 03:03 PM

BP

“ *Barbara James Phillips sent a virtual gift in memory of Bertha McNeal*



Barbara & James Phillips - December 29, 2022 at 02:29 PM

LT

“ *Larry Clementine Tardy lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



Larry & Clementine Tardy - December 29, 2022 at 12:39 PM

VK

“ *To the family of Ms. Bertha Mcneal,  
I met Ms. Mcneal only three times, each time was at a Motown event! She made an impact each time I encountered her spirit! Her light will continue to shine through each and every person she met! Always keep her in your heart! Her light can only shine through the people she touched! Let that light shine in her memory!  
Rest In Power Ms. Mcneal  
VJ Kerney*



Vincent J Kerney - December 29, 2022 at 12:30 PM

TF

“ *Trenia Patrick @ Family lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Trenia Turner Patrick @ Family** - December 29, 2022 at 11:13 AM

MK

“ *My name is Marie (aka Ms K) and Bertha and I worked together for over 30 years. What a joy it was to go to our school concerts, music meetings and in-services with her. She always radiated energy, joy and love of music. I loved accompanying her when she directed and I loved when she accompanied me. We really shared our love of students, music, and their growth as better people through their involvement in and passion for music. She made such a difference in the lives of so many young people as their mentor and shining life example. How blessed we were to be able to call her friend and confidant. I am praying for her family that God will lift you up and comfort you in this time of need.*

*God bless.* 🙏🙏

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**Marie Kerstetter** - December 29, 2022 at 08:40 AM

CH

“ *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Matthew 5:8. Ms. McNeal was a wonderful person. Always caring, friendly, and with a bright smile. She blessed my life with Melva, my Michigan State University roommate, and lifelong friend. And Melva has blessed my son with Spencer, who is my son's Oakland University Lil' Bro. Ms. McNeal blessed me, my son, and so many more. We will miss her, but I know my mother is happy to have Ms. McNeal to hang out with in heaven and watch over Melva, me, and our families. My prayers are for the Payton, McNeal, and Barbee families. Love Crystal and Hakim*



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**Crystal & Hakim** - December 28, 2022 at 11:07 PM

BW

“ *Bill Wallace lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Bill Wallace** - December 28, 2022 at 08:46 PM

CF

“ *Coretta Miller & Family purchased the Lavender Reflections Spray for the family of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal.*



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**Coretta Miller & Family** - December 27, 2022 at 10:54 PM

DB

“ I'll miss talking and texting my beautiful, caring and humble Dear Cousin Bertha! Oh the lives that has been touched in so many positive ways...she leave such a great legacy! Family....God is our Strength!

*Deloris J. Burrow*



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**Deloris J. Burrow** - December 27, 2022 at 10:04 PM

JH

“ Jerry Harris lit a candle in memory of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal



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**Jerry Harris** - December 27, 2022 at 02:56 PM

DS

“ I (Doug Smith) had known Bertha and her family since we both attended Flint Public Schools, Flint Jr. College and WMU in Kalamazoo. Bertha and Norma Barbee's family's and my family lived in the same neighborhood. Bertha was like a sister to me. I called her Bert and She called me Duggie. It was an honor and a surprise when Bertha asked me to join the Barbee family singing group which included her Uncle, Bertha and her cousins. I played the bongos. We performed at nightclubs and record hops. Subsequent success of the Barbees as Velvelettes is well known. Everyone is proud of the young ladies from Flint Mi. and Kalamazoo Mi. Our Fraternity (Alpha Phi Alpha-Epsilon Xi) is proud that Bertha Barbee McNeal is a member of our first Sweetheart Court. As one of the founding Brothers of our fraternity, I extend our Condolences to the Family and everlasting love for Sister Bertha Barbee McNeal.

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**Douglas Smith** - December 27, 2022 at 02:41 PM



“ *Strength & Solace Spray was purchased for the family of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal.*



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December 27, 2022 at 02:38 PM



“ *Bill Wallace lit a candle in memory of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal*



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**Bill Wallace** - December 27, 2022 at 12:20 PM



“ *Fellow Motown Alumni, Pat Cosby purchased the Lily and Rose Tribute Spray for the family of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal.*



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**Fellow Motown Alumni, Pat Cosby** - December 26, 2022 at 07:26 PM



“ *Our deepest sympathy to the entire McNeal family. Keeping you all in our thoughts & prayers for God to comfort your grieving hearts.*

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**Cousin Michael & Bethany Harris** - December 26, 2022 at 07:25 PM

SW

“ Our sympathy to Bertha McNeal's family. Bertha was a long time friend and classmate at Flint Central in Flint, Mi. Bertha was a kind loving friend to us Moses & Sadie Williams.



Sadie Lee Williams - December 26, 2022 at 04:41 PM

TW

“ I love you big cuz. You were always so sweet and you will be truly missed. May you rest in peace.



Tonia Williams - December 26, 2022 at 02:24 PM

LB

“ LB lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal



LB - December 26, 2022 at 01:10 PM

AB

“ Althea Barbee lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal



Althea J Barbee - December 26, 2022 at 12:35 PM

CG

“ *Cordell/Brenda Gardner lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Cordell/Brenda Gardner** - December 26, 2022 at 11:58 AM

SJ

“ *Susan Johnson lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Susan Johnson** - December 25, 2022 at 09:31 PM

PD

“ *Barbee was my favorite music teacher at Edison Elementary around 1978. I will always cherish the memories of her when I was at Edison Elementary when we would "Ease on down the road" to The Wiz.*

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**Paul DeYoung** - December 25, 2022 at 12:58 PM

PD

“ *Paul DeYoung lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Paul DeYoung** - December 25, 2022 at 12:52 PM

ET

“ *Ernelle Taylor lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Ernelle Taylor** - December 25, 2022 at 06:07 AM

JD

“ *Jack Dunigan lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Jack Dunigan** - December 24, 2022 at 02:37 PM

PG

“ *Pauline Gardner lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Pauline Gardner** - December 24, 2022 at 10:40 AM

DA

*Deepest condolences to family and friends. I'm Dana, daughter of fellow Velvelette, Mildred Arbor.*

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**Dana Arbor** - December 25, 2022 at 06:47 PM

CM

“ Cynthia McKenzie lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal



Cynthia McKenzie - December 24, 2022 at 12:04 AM

CH

“ Bertha McNeal was a wonderful lady and teacher. She always had a lovely smile to greet you! She will certainly be missed along with her musical talent.  
Charmane Echols



Charmane - December 23, 2022 at 10:54 PM

GS

I sometimes had the pleasure of being with Bertha as they traveled on several occasions. She always called me Gertie and I called her Bertie. She always calmed a situation. A true joy to be in the presence of. An unforgettable smile.

Gersteen Sherrod - December 26, 2022 at 12:17 PM



“ Ms McNeal was my music teacher ❤️ my heartfelt Condolences to her Family



Karest Willis Brown - December 23, 2022 at 08:36 PM

EA

“ *Ms. McNeal was my piano teacher for two amazing years. She poured so much of her talents into her teaching. It was amazing to get to know her. She will be remembered forever.* ”



Eddie Anderson - December 23, 2022 at 06:01 PM

RW

“ *Rubynell Walker-Barbee lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal* ”



Rubynell Walker-Barbee - December 23, 2022 at 05:35 PM

LS

“ *Lola Streeter lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal* ”



Lola Streeter - December 23, 2022 at 03:39 PM

JG

“ *My sincerest condolences to the family. I first met Bertha many year's ago when the velvettes performed at an event for our organization, the national association for human rights workers ( nahrw). She was a very charming, “ low-key “ and elegant individual, which impressed me much more than her incredible talent.* ”

joel gibson - December 23, 2022 at 11:51 AM



Jennifer Carpenter

“ My deepest condolences to your family. Ms. McNeal will forever hold a special place in my heart. She was my music teacher in middle school and inspired a life long love for music and artistic expression.

Jennifer Carpenter - December 22, 2022 at 08:28 PM



“ I played in the backing band with The (wonderful!) Velveettes in the Uk in 2018 and when I heard of Bertha’s passing I was so sad. To meet her even for five minutes was enough to know what a beautiful person she was. It was such a privilege to have met her. My heart goes out to her family, (which of course includes Norma) and Cal and Mildred...and anyone else that knew her. RIP Bertha xxx

Ceri Ashley-Sanders - December 22, 2022 at 08:22 PM



“ Dallas and family lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal



Dallas Boards and family - December 22, 2022 at 07:30 PM



“ My Condolences to the Family and friends God bless you all RIP Ms. Bertha



Earline Fields - December 22, 2022 at 06:21 PM

DB

“ 1 file added to the album *Coosin Bertha and Aunt Sarah at Cousin Lynn's wedding.*



Daphne Barbee-Wooten - December 22, 2022 at 04:28 PM



“ *Strength & Solace Spray was purchased for the family of Ms. Bertha Louise McNeal.*



December 22, 2022 at 04:16 PM

WF

“ *WALKER FAMILY lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



WALKER FAMILY - December 22, 2022 at 03:14 PM

MV

“ *Mignon Vincent lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



Mignon Vincent - December 22, 2022 at 02:11 PM

CS

“ *Cindy Smith sent a virtual gift in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Cindy Smith** - December 22, 2022 at 11:16 AM

MV

“ *Mignon Vincent lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Mignon Vincent** - December 22, 2022 at 10:50 AM

LB

“ *I will miss you my dear, sweet cousin. Loving you always.*



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**Lynn Barbee** - December 22, 2022 at 10:31 AM

TF

“ *Tyrone Karen Foster lit a candle in memory of Bertha McNeal*



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**Tyrone & Karen Foster** - December 22, 2022 at 07:58 AM

BW

*I taught with Bertha at Northeastern Jr. High.. wonderful, positive Teacher.. so humble and so talented...Rest now Bertha.. you will be missed*

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**B Winter** - December 23, 2022 at 02:25 PM