

On Saturday March 27, 1999, Her Excellency Janet Jagan, President of the Republic of Guyana, will speak at Burton Auditorium, York University on "The Life and Times of Cheddi Jagan," the inaugural lecture which will launch the series to be known as "The Jagan Lectures." The lectures will reflect Cheddi Jagan's vision of the possibility of a New Human Global Order.

It will be Janet Jagan's task to contextualize the struggle in which Cheddi Jagan was engaged, as well as the vision for social justice which enabled him to develop the appeal for "A New Global Human Order," a task which she is admirably placed to perform. As Cheddi Jagan's wife and life-long companion for over 40 years, she knows the public and the private personality of the man more deeply than perhaps any biographer can.

Janet Jagan herself is a warm, humane and immensely interesting personality. The first impression that she gives is an almost palpable warmth and an ability to relate directly to people. It is this rare quality that enabled her to do the kind of solid, active grassroots work in Guyana since the 1940s.

Born to privilege in Chicago in 1920, she chose to make a home and a family in a Guyanese Indian community and to immerse herself in a life of political activism.

Janet Jagan arrived in British Guiana in 1943 and spent the first ten years working as a dental nurse in her husband's clinic. Almost immediately after her arrival she became involved in the labour struggle and was a member of the British Guiana Labour Union, the first one to be established in the territory. Along with Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, she also worked to organize domestic workers.

In 1946 she founded the W.P.O. (Women's Political and Economic Organisation). In the same year she was also co-founder of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) and edited the PAC Bulletin. Along with Dr. Cheddi Jagan, she founded the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and was elected General Secretary, holding that post from 1950 to 1970. She was appointed the first editor of *Thunder*, the PPP's official organ, and became the first elected woman to the Georgetown City Council. She was one of three women in 1953 to enter the House of Assembly, which she did as a representative of Essequibo County. She was also the first woman to become Deputy Speaker of the Legislature.

Her activism and commitment to her political beliefs have never wavered throughout her long history of struggle within Guyana. In 1948 she took part in fund raising for the East Coast Demerara sugar strike which was put down by the British colonial police. The fate of the Enmore Martyrs affected her deeply and she says that their struggle has since become hers. In 1955 when the constitution was suspended and the PPP government ousted, Janet Jagan was imprisoned.

In fact, throughout her long years of political activism, along with other members of the PPP she endured great hardship and insecurity. Family life was disrupted by constant upheaval, and on occasion, imprisonment of either of the Jagans.

In a television interview in Guyana shortly after the results of the elections were announced in 1992, she reminisces about how she would often be harassed by police as she drove her son to school. His nervousness at the police car trailing them would no doubt have been aggravated by an actual memory of her imprisonment.

Her account of this imprisonment is as follows:

"In 1957 many things happened and our party entered into a campaign of civil disobedience. You weren't allowed to hold meetings. We were accused of holding illegal meetings, having subversive literature etc. I was before the courts and was found guilty on all four charges. I was given a fine or imprisonment. But our policy was that we didn't pay fines; we went to prison.

So I went to prison. What was interesting was that Dr. Jagan had gone to prison about six months before. The day he came out I went in - we didn't even see each other.

So I spent altogether - with remission and all that - 5 months in jail. First I was in Georgetown jail and then I was moved over to New Amsterdam jail."

A friend recalls the event: "Though she was always slender,

she came out of jail a mere wisp of herself. She was pale and thin...she had been subjected to the same harsh conditions and poor food as any other inmate."

Janet had made stuffed dolls in jail and had also kept a prison diary. When she came out she was not bitter. Jail was the consequence of her political activity, that was all. She went about her work as usual.

Meeting Janet Jagan is an exhilarating, interesting and humbling experience - all at the same time. In February 1992 I had this privilege.

I visited her at her office in Freedom House, Georgetown, Guyana. Her ready laughter is what I remember most keenly. That, and her vigorous and informed discussion of Caribbean literature, global feminism, Phyllis Allfrey's politics, grassroots women's issues, the im-

portance of media, the silencing of voices of protest...the abnegation of self for a cause that she believes in.

Here is a citizen of the world in the vanguard of a fight for human values, and a vision of a New Human Global Order, bringing to bear the educational and other entitlements of her background as well as her own humane beliefs in equal opportunities for all, to the Republic of Guyana, over which she now presides as its President.

Who is this gentle, humorous woman with the fine lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, her smile betraying at once a lively and direct interest in people and things, *malgre tout*...

On the morning of October 5, 1992 in Georgetown, amidst rumours of unspeakable dangers to party members at Freedom House, it was Janet who stayed with the staff in a situation of near-siege while other key people were whisked off to safety. "The Iron Lady" - the name she earned as a result of her courageous stand.

In the post-election 1992 interview she was asked: "What social role will you play as President's wife?"

Her reply registered the years of political commitment and unflinching sacrifice in the service of human values:

"For...my whole life...my whole adult life I have been a political activist and a journalist. When you say social and entertainment and all that - it's all behind me - I couldn't manage my political life and a big social life.

So I never had much of a social life. But if you speak of social in terms of helping people, helping children get better nutrition and better health care, and helping mothers enjoy a better nutritional condition and get better care at the time of delivery - at that social level - yes, that's part of my life.

And that's the motivation I have had to spend 40-odd years in politics. My motivation is to relieve misery and let people get ahead and enjoy their lives because life should be enjoyable; it shouldn't be a torment or shouldn't be an everyday punishment because of water or whatever it is.

People must be able to have the basic necessities of life to be able to enjoy life."

Janet Jagan, nee Rosenberg, was born in Chicago, Illinois, on October 20, 1920. She was educated at the University of Detroit, Wayne State University, Michigan State College and the Cook County School of Nursing.

Her honours are many and include the Order of Excellence (O.E.), Guyana's highest honour. She has also been presented with the Gandhi Gold Medal Award from UNESCO (1997) and the Order of the Liberator (Simon Bolivar) in Venezuela (1998).

Janet Jagan's indomitable spirit has been forged in the crucible of struggle. She has written poems celebrating the lives of comrades Michael Forde and Kowsillia, both of whom are fallen soldiers in the Guyanese struggle for freedom and sovereignty.

*Alice, your simple
courage
Defied the outrages
Of an iniquitous system
Alice, you protested
with your life
Against the inequalities
Around you.*

(To Alice, also known as Kowsillia, who died at Leonora)



Ramabai
Espinet



Ready laughter...Guyana's President Mrs. Janet Jagan