

Tribute to Janet Jagan

by

Leyland Hazlewood

I feel honored to have the opportunity to pay tribute to Janet Jagan. I offer no great wisdom or profound insights about her life and contributions. Janet Jagan's life has been large and her value has already been well established. I believe that an understanding of her significance will continue to expand when tested by the dispassionate and objective hindsight of history.

This afternoon, I simply want to express my appreciation of her, based upon personal observations and experiences as a neighbor and also as a student and supporter of the movement for Guyana's independence. In the end, Janet Jagan was someone with whom a relaxed and trusting conversation was a pleasure to experience. It would be punctuated with some irony as if to goad you into thinking or approaching an issue from a different perspective.

Only a low paling (fence) separated the Jagan dental surgery from my family's residence. In fact, the address for both places were written as 199 Charlotte Street. No one bothered to indicate that these addresses were east and west half lots. It was the party headquarters, before Freedom House was established. Virtually every day except for absences from Georgetown I saw Cheddi and Janet. For 5 years until my departure to study in the United States, our families enjoyed various forms of interaction, over the fence. It was always friendly, polite and enriched by our friendship with the Jagan clan (Sirpaul, Nipe, Bark, Doris, Jeune and Edith).

Through my teenage eyes, Janet Jagan (like her husband) was a woman with a purpose – as busy as a worker bee – pursuing the tasks necessary to educate the Guyanese populace and advance the struggle to end colonialism in British Guiana. One morning in October 1953, my respect for Janet Jagan and her husband, Cheddi, increased exponentially. There was a commotion as I was getting dressed for school. On looking through my bedroom window, I witnessed the aggressiveness of the detectives supported by Welsh Fusiliers that had come to depose our elected government. Before that morning, I had never seen real automatic weapons, except for in the World War II movies. That day is still vividly etched in my memory. Still, in spite of detention and other humiliations, this woman from across the sea and her husband remained steadfast in their cause.

Later, when Janet Jagan was permitted to visit the United States, her conversations with our little group of activists against colonialism were always specific and practical. She would say, for example, 'We are being overwhelmed with publications. Do you have any suggestions about how to catalog them?'

For many years to come, the historians and the experts will elaborate on Janet's and her husband's role in helping to awaken the Guyanese masses, human rights, women's rights and lots more. However, I was also privileged to experience her funny, softer and simpler side when:

- Reminiscing about characters in New York who supported Cheddi and the independence movement during very difficult times;
- Discussing Cheddi's health when I called to inquire as she kept vigil at Bethesda Naval Hospital;
- Reminiscing about members in President Mandela's cabinet whom they used to meet at conferences and rallies in Eastern Europe, during the struggles
- As one of the guards at Cheddi's casket at State House attempted to prevent me from giving her a condolence card that my mother had sent from New York
- Joking about herself as an old lady as she talked about her broken arm during the time that she was President of Guyana

In time, the importance and symbolism of her being the President of the Republic Guyana and her other accomplishments will be fully debated and appreciated. I just want to end my tribute to this outstanding human by reading the first letter that she wrote this year, the last year of her life.

January 1, 2009

Dear Leyland,

Thanks so much for sending me that wonderful calendar of Barack Obama. It was so thoughtful of you.

Of course, here, we have been following the US elections closely and I don't think there is one person in Guyana not supporting him. In fact, I wrote a couple of articles on his path to victory. Now, he faces unbelievable challenges.

This is my first letter of the New Year. I wish you and your family all the very best for 2009.

Best regards
Janet

Thank you for dedicating your life to people of Guyana.