

First Lady Janet Jagan

Speaking Of People

by *Claudette Barle*

SOMEBODY ought to write the biography of Janet Jagan.

Today, after some 40 years as an active participant in Guyanese politics, First Lady Janet Jagan, is resisting blandishments from the ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP) to take up a ministerial post and to be involved formally in the administration of government.

The wife of President Cheddi Jagan just wants to continue doing what she has been working at for the last few years. That is being Editor and one of the leading columnists of the MIRROR newspaper which now publishes twice-weekly. She also wants to continue doing a little political work at her not-very-modern office at Freedom House, and basically taking care of her husband and her home.

Janet Jagan has not had domestic help for the last 20 years; she goes to market on a Sunday and then does chores around the house; she cooks once each day; makes sure she catches a half hour of CNN news before she leaves each morning for work, bobbing through city traffic in a

little blue-gray Nissan March car, to the New Guyana Company, Industrial Site, Ruimveldt.

Her daughter Nadira sends her lovely clothes (for she can't abide dressmakers) and her son Joey shops and sends shoes for her.

Now in her 70th year, Janet Jagan's well-known dark tresses (which sometimes used to be pulled back in a pony-tail) have given way to a short, fluffy halo

of silky off-white hair which immensely adds to her mature, more mellow appearance, and which can indeed be termed a metaphor for her more receptive, less confrontational demeanour these last few years.

It is difficult to find a point — a specific moment in her life — at which to begin a story on this woman, so checkered, so eventful, so influential has been

more than a dollar per month for their work. For that, she was pilloried by the middle-class, well-to-do matrons who threatened to dismiss all the servants they had, if Mrs Jagan persisted in her outrageous demands.

One could also begin with the formation of the first political women's organisation to be formed in pre-Independent Guyana. It was called the Women's Political and Economic Organisation (WPEO) and at the moment of its birth on Tuesday July 9, 1946, at the Carnegie Public Free Library, the WPEO pledged through its leaders Janet Jagan and the late Winifred Gaskin, to educate women to their political responsibilities as

on that most auspicious occasion. Janet Jagan, then General Secretary of the PPP, was appointed Deputy Speaker of the House of Assembly.

Once affectionately called the "blue-eyed Bhowgie" by Indo-Guyanese, Janet Jagan became known throughout Guyana and the Third World as a dynamic politician fighting fiercely for freedom from British colonialism. During the nationalist struggle, she was jailed by the colonial government in the 50s. That did not quench her fire. She mothered two children, Joey and Nadira, campaigned vigorously with other PPP leaders; held ministerial posts (she served for one year as Home Affairs

Now comes the calm

members of the community and to train leaders for future elections to the municipality and legislature.

Another point of departure for Janet Jagan's life story is that glorious day in 1953 when the victorious People's Progressive Party (PPP) entered the Legislative Council for the first time. Fifteen men and three women were the first represen-

Minister and then was appointed Minister for Labour, Health and Housing); kept a high national and international profile in the days of the Cold War when the world was divided into two blocs;

After a long and brilliant career on the stage of Guyanese politics First Lady Janet Jagan now wants to watch from the wings.

her life on the stage of Guyana's politics.

One could begin with her feminist/political work in the late 1940s when she was demanding, among other things, that domestic servants be paid

tatives elected under universal adult suffrage.

History records that the women — the Three J's — Jessie Burnham, Jane Phillips Gay and Janet Jagan, wore white skirts, red blouses and red accessories

and when her party was in opposition in the 60s, 70s and 80s, never ceased campaigning in the National Assembly for adequate pensions for the old, for better facilities and attention for neglected children and the disinherited of the Guyanese society.

This high-voltage lady is also a sensitive poet and children's short story writer. Her works have been published in prestigious anthologies such as CREATION FIRE edited by Ramabai Espinet.

Now that the People's Progressive Party is in power, Mrs Jagan, like her husband Cheddi, tells acquaintances that she feels no way different than the way she was before October 5, 1992.

In an interview with her at Freedom House last Monday, I told her of a recent print media picture story of her, notebook and pen in hand, covering the President's visit to Omai. She was referred to as First Lady, since she had also accompanied her husband in an official capacity.

"Was that so?" she asked in amazement, and then burst into a pleasant little peal of laughter.

"I love journalism," she explained toying with a paperweight on her desk. "My husband wants me to take up a ministerial post. But I do not want to do so. He has even promised me a position where I could be called on to represent him or the Government at international conferences. There would be no payment involved and I would keep on with my duties as editor of the MIRROR. I promised him to think it over, but I am not very

interested. I have held ministerial positions in the past, but I think that I should not have a person a chance. I am doing my present job. Of course I am doing work. I see hundreds of people each month. I support them fully in what they are doing. But I want to continue with my career in journalism. Besides, this First Lady position, in my opinion, is a lot of work.

"When I attended a Workshop on the First Child in Barbados, I noticed people observing me. I realised it just could be incidental. It was a security watch on me. I travelled alone without an escort. Every morning I would take a taxi to work. It happens when I attend abroad. I attend all the time but early in the morning late in the evenings for an hour in the water. I noticed someone following me. I did not bother. He was doing his job. And it was the security watch that gave me a glimpse of Janet Jagan of whom little is known."

AS A HOUSEWIFE

"You know as a young girl growing up in Chicago, United States of America, I was very athletic. I used to swim for swimming. I was good at high jumping, and archery. Few people know about that part of my life. As a youth, I thoroughly enjoyed athletic activities. I was good at track races, and participated in all the events there. So whenever there was an opportunity I swam or two each day."

"I do my own housework. I have been doing it for the last 20 years. I work



The three "J's" in 1953

Jessie Burnham, Jane Phillips Gay and Janet Jagan



PIC BY MIKE NORVILLE

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interested. I have held ministerial positions in the past and I think that I should give a young person a chance. I just love my present job. Of course I do party work. I see hundreds of people each month. I support my husband fully in whatever he is doing. But I want to continue with my career in journalism. Besides, this First Lady-business I think, is a lot of fluff.

"When I attended a UNICEF Workshop on the Rights of the Child in Barbados recently I noticed people observing me. I realised it just could not be coincidental. It was some sort of security watch on me. But I had travelled alone without any escort. Every morning and evening I would take a swim. This happens when I attend meetings abroad. I attend all the sittings, but early in the mornings and late in the evenings I must have an hour in the water. Even then I noticed someone looking at me. I did not bother with him. He was doing his job."

And it was then that she gave me a glimpse of the Janet Jagan of whom little is known.

AS A HOUSEWIFE

"You know as a teenage girl growing up in Chicago, in the United States of America, I was very athletic. I used to win prizes for swimming. I was also good at high jumping, ice-skating and archery. Few people know about that part of my life. But as a youth, I thoroughly enjoyed athletic activities. I was not much good at track races, but I participated in all the events that were there. So whenever I get the opportunity I swim for an hour or two each day."

"I do my own housework. I have been doing this for the last 20 years. I would not say

that I am a very good housekeeper, but I try. I do most of my cleaning on Sundays. And that is the day I go to the market. In fact I have come to enjoy shopping in the markets on a Sunday. During the week, I clean a little here and there. I cook once each day and that is our late meal together. Of course in the mornings I prepare breakfast for both of us and do up a snack for lunch. During the last weeks of the election campaign some relatives got into the habit of sending cooked meals for us, because I had so little time to cook. Just a while ago I asked them not to bother anymore because I had settled down again to my routine. I organise my work so that cooking takes up the minimum time.

She reminisced: "When the children were small, I used to spend a lot of time away from home campaigning. This was especially hard for them for both their father and I were in politics. Up to a few years ago they would still grumble that I was not always at home when they wanted me. But in the same breath they would tell me how proud they are of my achievements. They were normal children with the normal sibling rivalries, but I know that beneath it all, they cared for us and for each other."

AS FIRST LADY

"I know that I have some social duties which I must fulfil with my husband, the President. I will carry them out to the best of my ability. People tell me that I have to get special clothes made up, for as First Lady I have to look different. I do have some nice clothes which my daughter bought and sent for me. She has very good taste and she would instruct me as to what accessories to wear with which outfit. So when you see me looking really well-dressed that is when I am wearing what my daughter has organised for me. I am lucky in that both my children are very good and

...ing. When I am abroad, my son likes to take me shopping. He likes to buy me two and three pairs of the same shoes at one time. I have to beg him to stop spending so much money. I am quite comfortable with the things I have.

"You know, I just can't make a fetish of clothes. I refuse to think about clothes and shoes and bags all the time. There are many more important things to be done."

ON HER CAREER AS JOURNALIST

"Well right now, I am in a very bad way for reporters. The PPP Government took three of my journalists at one fell swoop. So I have to double up and get the columnists, I have to be regular and to keep deadlines. We have introduced computers at the MIRROR. I tried them for a while, but I am back to my old manual typewriter. I just cannot understand how to operate these new gadgets. I refuse to part with my old typewriter."

"But the more immediate problem for me is staff. I just don't have people to cover assignments and write about them. The MIRROR has Sunday and Wednesday publications and I am in charge of them. So far I have found people to be very co-operative when you call to get certain information. For instance, I had to check with Police Commissioner Laurie Lewis about an incident and he was really on top of things. I am impressed

with that kind of professionalism."

ON THE PPP VICTORY

"We have succeeded after all these years and we have a massive job ahead of us. I trust that our administration will achieve the monumental task of bringing prosperity to this land. We have too many resources to be in a poor economic situation. There is a lot of work ahead for the nation of Guyana."

ABOUT HER OWN MISSION

"I have to admit that I am greatly concerned about the scourge of poverty and the terrible ways in which it affects the lives of our young children. As I said when I addressed a recent UNICEF Workshop on the Rights of the Child in Barbados, we could go on forever making laws and regulations as to what rights children should have.

But we in this part of the world already have legislation to protect the child. We have legislation that makes the right to education a must for chil-

dren in our society. But who checks when children do not attend school because they have no uniforms or shoes? Some of these children have to fetch water from long distances for their households. Some mothers send the children to sell and to earn so that some money could be there for food."

"We have to place our emphasis on implementation of those rights that are already in our constitution.

"Then there are the terrible cases of physical and sexual abuses meted out to children. We have to work with our social workers, and parents and guardians to see in what ways we can alleviate these abuses.

"Of course, I know that the bottomline is poverty. Unless we can eradicate or in some way reduce poverty in this nation, we will continue to have, the homeless, street children, the destitute all suffering. I have made a vow to myself to work for some improvement in the lives of poor children. If I can make my contribution there and see some results, I will have accomplished something."