

Cousin Janet, president of Guyana

BY JUDY FLANDER

When my cousin, Janet Jagan, was elected president of Guyana recently, the wire service stories invariably identified her as a 77-year-old grandmother. Before the election, *People* magazine ran a captivating shot of Janet with three of her five grandchildren in a hammock on her porch in Georgetown, the Guyanese capital. Charming, yes. But what a confining and, if I may say, sexist way to identify a vigorous, politically potent woman who has been uniquely modern since her childhood in Chicago.

I'm not a bit surprised she has just been elected president of a country — even a country in South America, formerly owned by the British, that most people know little about, save for the infamous 1979 Jonestown Massacre.

To kiss her off as a grandmother! This champion of plantation workers, native Amerindians and women's rights. This co-founder of the frankly Marxist People's Progressive Party (PPP). This veteran of riots, bombings, jail and house arrest. This leftist firebrand who, with her husband, led the drive for Guyana's independence from Britain in 1966. This editor of the *Mirror* newspaper in Georgetown from 1972 to 1997. This founder of two art museums, long-time member of Parliament and former acting ambassador to the United Nations. This 1997 recipient of UNESCO's Gandhi Gold Medal for Peace, Democracy and Women's Rights.

Her father and mine were born in Missouri, as our paternal grandparents were. In the 1930s, when I was growing up in Chicago, dark-haired, nearsighted and plain, I looked up to my beautiful cousin Janet, a slim and blue-eyed blonde, as glamorous as a movie star. She had lots of dates because of her beauty and dash, but she also pursued flying, art and politics.

Before Janet was out of her teens, she took flying lessons with money earned from part-time jobs. That's as far as she got, though; flying was too expensive. The family never had much money. In hopes of serving in World War II, Janet quit college to enter nursing school, and along the way, cared for our grandfather in his last illness. Before she graduated, she fell in love with a young dentist from Guyana who had recently completed studies in the United States.



JANET JAGAN

Cheddi Jagan was the eldest of 11 children born on a sugar plantation to parents who had come to South America from East India. In 1943, he and Janet eloped. Their wedding is memorialized in a photo taken in a "three-for-25 cents" booth, which shows two exceedingly good-looking and happy people. They headed for Guyana, where Cheddi opened a dental clinic. In a country where the majority of the population is either Indian or black, Janet was noticed and not always favourably.

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All the parents were appalled by the marriage. My uncle Charlie raged, and he never saw his daughter again. Guyana was too far away and too expensive to visit; he died in the 1950s. My Aunt Kitty more or less got over it, took care of Janet and Cheddi's daughter, Nadira, during a dicey time in Guyana in 1964, and even made a couple of trips there herself. The elder Jagans were soon won over by their daughter-in-law's simple style. She endeared herself forever when she and her husband, who rarely spent any of their skimpy earnings on themselves, paid for the education of Cheddi's siblings.

Janet worked as Cheddi's dental nurse. Radicalized by the Depression, she began to think about those people existing with too little money, too little hope and too little power. In Guyana, particularly on the sugar plantation where her father-in-law worked, she observed them up close. It was the plight of the workers that first got the Jagans' political juices going. They became active in union work, then formed the PPP — which won some and lost some. They had a hard time coping with the British, the United States, the CIA and the opposing People's National Congress (PNC): Ejection from office. Jail. Rigged elections. After 28 years of struggle, Cheddi was elected president in 1992 and served until his death from a heart attack in March.

I guess it's inevitable that Janet now has the "widow president" stigma. It's true that women sometimes follow their deceased husbands or fathers into office, but Janet was never anything but Cheddi's equal political partner. For a long time, during the early days, she says she was the most hated person in Guyana.

Janet never had any ambition to be president of Guyana. She loved all the other things she did — particularly the few months she substituted as U.N. ambassador and had time to enjoy New York theatre and art. We spent a lot of time together there the year after Cheddi was elected. She also would have been content to go on running the *Mirror* — where she not only wrote muscular editorials, but also initiated and wrote most of a children's page and other homey features. During her election campaign, the opposition tried to stir up the ashes of the old hatreds, attacking her race and her gender. But "of all the vile things they said ... these didn't mean a pin," she said.

As president of Guyana, Janet now has a daunting job. There's a huge foreign debt accumulated during past administrations, which Cheddi sought, not always successfully, to have written off. There's an urgent need to rebuild the infrastructure — schools, hospitals, roads for farmers. Electricity is still a big problem, but one Janet has promised to resolve in the first two years of her term. While there's a 92 per cent literacy rate in Guyana, better education and the creation of more jobs for young people are also high on her agenda.

Guyana's ambassador to the United States, Odeen Ishmael, says that one thing Janet is in a unique position to achieve is bringing together the country's two largest race groups. Guyana, approximately the size of Kansas, has about 800,000 residents, 59 per cent of them Indian, 37 per cent black. "She is in a minority, herself," he notes. In an unusually quiet election, Janet had a large crossover vote from blacks, particularly in areas where there are numerous public service projects under way from Cheddi's term as president.

She would call the presidency her latest job. I call it her destiny. I think her country is lucky to have her — this pragmatic, democratic woman who spends a lot of her time at the openings of new schools, new roads, new businesses as her country tries to move ahead once again.



TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

GUYANA'S LEADER: Janet Jagan, right, chats with the late Lotta Dempsey of *The Star* during a Toronto visit in 1962.

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