

# The Other Side of Cde. Janet



Sadie Amin and President Janet Jagan at a wedding of a member of the 1997 PPP/C government.

October 20, 2020 was the centenary of the birth anniversary of the late, former President Janet Jagan, OE. The Guyana Post Office Corporation issued a commemorative stamp to mark the occasion and it was launched at State House under the patronage of His Excellency, President Irfaan Ali. In keeping with COVID 19 measures, the event was controlled as to numbers of attendees. I was in attendance and couldn't help but think the crowd size would have met with Mrs. Jagan's approval. I smiled when I reflected on how she abhorred what she perceived as fanfare being made over her. I could imagine her saying: "Ah, why all the fuss? I don't need such an accolade." But she would have been wrong as such recognition is well deserved.

The name Janet Jagan conjures all kinds of response from all segments of society, locally, regionally and internationally. Some loved her. Some hated her. She was a heroine or a villain, a friend or a foe. Only history can absolve or condemn her. I will not delve into the debate on her public or political life. There is enough recorded information to read and make conclusions. Good, bad or indifferent, Guyanese have to admit that Mrs. Jagan has had a tremendous impact and influence on our nation since her arrival on our shores in 1943 up until her death in 2009. That is the public persona. What

most people didn't know much about was the private side of Janet Jagan. Her kindness, her fierce loyalty, her generosity of spirit, her care and consideration for those less fortunate, her grudges, her wit and charm but most of all her positive, upbeat attitude to life in general.

My sojourn with Cde. Janet (as she was respectfully referred to by party comrades) started in the lead-up to the 1997 General Elections up until her death. It was a relatively short period of time as some of her associations and friendships spanned in excess of fifty years. But I got to know her during a significant period: her brief tenure as Guyana's first female Prime Minister, a reluctant presidential candidate, the hectic campaign trail, the vicious opposition strategies to deny her the presidency, her swearing in as the first female Executive President, the post-elections strife and mayhem, the statecraft and diplomacy of accepting a reduced term of office, her resignation as president and the post-presidency and private life of this remarkable woman.

Like many party comrades, I initially knew Cde. Janet from going to Freedom House. She was pleasant but reserved, almost aloof. One day I was wearing a chunky necklace consisting of semi-precious stones. She came up to me and complimented me on "pulling off" such an exotic piece of jewelry and "in the day time no less." I wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic. But it was the longest conversation I ever had with her. More than the customary three minutes or less. She told me she didn't have the confidence to wear such bold jewelry but that she loved semi-precious stones and had a book on gems and that her daughter and son-in-law were jewellers in Canada.

Two weeks after I received a call from the receptionist at Freedom House saying she had a package for me from Cde. Janet. It was her book on gems. Attached was an almost incomprehensible hand-written note saying: "Sadie, here's my book on gems. Check out the part on smoky opals (one of my favorites). Also my birthstone. I have one in a lovely setting. Will show you the next time I see you. Make sure you return my book. Cdes have an awful habit of not returning books." After a delightful read of the book I promptly returned it as I also harbored a gripe about non-return of my books. Therein began our exchange of books and notes. It took me a while to figure out her handwriting at a first reading.

After the death of President Cheddi Jagan in 1997 I decided to volunteer my time at Freedom House. I was assigned the position of Secretary to the General



President Janet Jagan and Sadie Amin on vacation in Barbados. In the background is the historic Sam Lord's Castle.

Secretary, Donald Ramotar. At the start of the 1997 campaign a letter written by a disgruntled party comrade disparaging Cde. Janet was widely circulated. In the missive, a statement was attributed to me, which was a lie. Cde. Janet, on seeing how upset I was, comforted me. She quoted Eleanor Roosevelt to the effect that women in politics had to have skin as tough as a rhinoceros. She shared some insights on some character assassinations on her. The next day she invited me to accompany her to a political meeting. Thereafter I became her informal aide.

By the time she was sworn in as president, we had experienced many unusual situations: at a meeting in Buxton someone threw an egg at the podium she was speaking at. Without batting an eyelid, Cde. Janet responded: "The PPP has improved the country so much in the last five years that you can't even find a rotten egg to throw at me." Later a small pebble was thrown at her resulting in a small cut to her hand. She dismissed that as "small potatoes." I witnessed first-hand the adoration of the masses for this undaunted woman. At functions and rallies she was heavily garlanded with fresh flowers sometimes with ants still in them. She endured the small inconveniences and always insisted on disposing the garlands in running water. This was her sensitization to religious and cultural norms. I learned more about being Guyanese from a person who was considered foreign yet knew more about local customs and traditions than most. After she assumed the presidency I was formally appointed Special Assistant to the President with the grand salary of \$1 per year.

I enjoyed working with Cde. Janet. She was a hard but

rewarding taskmistress. Short on patience for slackers and chronic complainers but high in praise for hard work and commitment. This woman was a stickler for punctuality, meeting deadlines and keeping her word once she gave it. If she held herself out to do something for a member of the public she doggedly called every public official until the end was attained. She rarely openly criticized when others showed weakness or failure. The presidency was grueling in terms of time yet her attention to party work and in particular, the Mirror newspapers, never diminished. Later when I became the editor of the Mirror I dreaded the red mark-ups on the papers at the weekly editorial board meeting. Happy were the days when there were no red pen scrawls. The Mirror was her pride and joy.

Some lesser know things about Cde. Janet was her love of reading and keeping up with current events worldwide. She had a voracious appetite for books, magazines and anything in print form. With a hectic schedule of official duties it was amazing that she found time to read as much as she did. She was an avid patron of the arts and had a substantial collection of paintings and artifacts. In her zeal to support "poor starving artists" she would occasionally purchase pieces she wasn't particularly fond of in order to help out. Cde. Janet and I served on the management committee of Castellani House, the National Art Gallery, where she actively pursued the repatriation of Guyanese art that were in other countries. Her intervention was necessary for the preservation of the murals at the Cheddi Jagan International Airport which almost met a disastrous end.

Cde. Janet was a person who remembered birthdays,

gave significant mementoes as gifts, wrote encouraging notes, sent flowers or visited sick or shut-in comrades and friends. She brushed off attention to herself but ensured the well-being of others. Her generosity was manifest in many ways. Most Saturdays when she met members of the public at Freedom House there were a number of persons who she gave charity to. It was always done in private, never letting the person lose his/her dignity. On days when she was absent, her driver or I were tasked with taking the money to the recipients. Her disregard for security concerns when she was president was somewhat challenging to the guards. She insisted on going to the market and personal shopping, making unscheduled stops, picking up persons who needed a ride en route. Once when we were on a private vacation in St. Kitts she wanted to travel incognito. It took quite an effort to get her to accept a security detail as a sitting head of state. She did not care for pomp and ceremony.

After she demitted office in 1999 Cde. Janet continued to engage in party and public life. She went daily to Freedom House, never missed submitting her weekly article to the Mirror, and kept engagements that would tire a much younger person. Her family meant the world to her especially her five grandchildren. In addition to her proliferation of political writings she wrote children's books with Guyanese themes. She was keen on promoting the rights and works of women particularly rural women whom she considered unsung heroines. Although she had a few medical conditions her wit and faculty were sharply intact. Her independence and zeal for life made one marvel at her ability to keep up her strenuous workload. Even a broken arm once did not disrupt her

daily routine unaided. She enjoyed swimming and going out to restaurants and the occasional late night coffee shops. She did not anger easily but held an occasional grudge. We had quite a few heated debates and periods of silence albeit not too often. A friend once told me that Cde. Janet didn't like her because she got the "crocodile smile." I laughed but I knew that smile was reserved for a few. Cde. Janet's take on the friend turned out to be sound as we later fell out.

A fuller, more all-encompassing life could not be attributed to anyone more deserving than Janet Jagan. She was larger than life and her impact on people was awe inspiring in her simplicity. My years with Janet Jagan have shaped me in ways I never expected. She was a friend and mentor who made me want to be my best. Her centenary birth anniversary was celebrated just the way she would have wanted: low-keyed without much fanfare. Her spirit lives on in many of us. I'm proud to have known Cde Janet and to have experienced her as my "once in a lifetime" occurrence.



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