

President Janet Jagan

A Tribute from the Guyana Cultural Association of New York, Inc.

by Malcolm Hall, President, Guyana Cultural Association of New York, Inc.

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President Janet Jagan, or “Comrade Janet,” as she was affectionately called, never wavered in her belief in the role that the creative arts had to play in the creation and building of the modern Guyanese nation. She dedicated every day of her life to this cause during the sixty-five years she lived in Guyana.

As we celebrate her life today, the Guyana Cultural Association of New York, Inc., the organizers of the annual Guyana Folk Festival, is proud to reflect upon a small but significant portion of her inspiring body of work in support of the creative arts in Guyana.

* President Janet Jagan recognized the importance of the printed word. She served with distinction as the Editor of the *Thunder* and the *Mirror*—two outstanding examples of activist journalism in Guyana. For historians, social scientists, and generations to come, those publications will always be important sources of Guyanese history.

* We must not forget that “Comrade Janet” was also a writer of children’s books. In works such as “When Grandpa Cheddi was a Boy”, “Children’s Stories of Guyana’s Freedom Struggles” and “Alligator Ferry Service” she drew effortlessly upon Guyana’s multi-racial heritage to tell inspiring and motivating stories.

* President Jagan was an ardent supporter of dance in Guyana. She was a silent supporter of the pioneering work in dance by her good friend Helen Taitt. Even before there was a National School of Dance or a National Dance Company, Comrade Janet encouraged Helen Taitt to explore and celebrate Guyana’s entire dance traditions including, Ballet, Katha, Nagara, Cumfa, Kwe Kwe, and Mari Mari.

* President Janet Jagan loved music and encouraged its development. She was proud of the collection of music she and her husband shared. She loved Paul Robeson and Nat Cole as she loved Brahms and the calypsonians such as “32” who lived near to Freedom House. She encouraged steel band in Guyana and is said to have played a role in sending the first Guyanese steel band to Cuba. She also played a personal role in helping Alan Bush to compose “The Sugar Reapers”—the first full-length opera on the Guyanese working-class struggles of the 1950s. The opera was premiered in December 1966 in Leipzig, East Germany.

* President Jagan supported the visual arts. Again, her support was not loud and full of self-serving bombast. It was quiet and focused. We must recognize on this day the role she played in housing Guyana’s National Art Collection in Castellani House and placing it under the supervision of the Office of the President.

* President Janet Jagan recognized the importance of research, the preservation of historical documents, and making those documents accessible. This orientation is evident in the work she and her daughter Nadira did in creating the Cheddi Jagan Research Center in Georgetown.

In the words of her friend Martin Carter, she “did not sleep to dream, but dreamt to change the world”—and she achieved that in Guyana. Thank you Comrade Janet! Like you, the Guyana Cultural Association of New York Inc; is committed to Preserving, Promoting, and Propagating Guyana’s creativity.