

Happy birthday Janet

by Dale A. Bisnauth

I wanted to insert a number before "birthday", but I am not too certain about Janet's age, so I decided to be cautious, because I am aware of how sensitive some people are over their ages. Not that I believe that Mrs Jagan falls in that category. Speaking about age, you have noticed that I speak full-mouthedly of the former President as Janet. Two things may be responsible for this. One is the fact that the status of being senior citizens does develop in those of us who enjoy that status, a sense of camaraderie (and comraderie) that transcends the boundaries of formal salutations. Secondly, and more important, Janet Jagan herself does not stand on ceremonies. This makes it so easy to relate to her as a person, and not as a person occupying an office, or a rank, or a status. I am sure that on her birthday many persons would have paid her handsome tributes which she deserves, and would have praised her fulsomely on her work and achievements. I would want to add my applause to those tributes. But, I want to comment on some personal glimpses that I have had of this remarkable woman, whose husband was the late great President Cheddi

Jagan. I am stating it like that because I want to indicate that she was a special person in her own right. To be sure, quite in keeping with her own character, she has given the impression of almost playing second fiddle to the man for whom she defied her parents - an act which speaks of the strength of her character.

All kinds of myths and folk stories have grown up around Janet. That in itself is a tribute to her, however good or misleading these myths may be, since myths do not grow up around ordinary, everyday persons. A UG student once approached me to arrange a meeting between herself and Janet Jagan. The student was working on an assignment for her lecturer. I arranged the interview. When the student came back from the interview, she said in great surprise: "Gosh! She is so human!" What did you expect, I asked. The twenty-five-year-old told me that she had heard and believed so many stories from her parents and their friends that she had concluded that Janet Jagan was something of an ogress with a mean streak who had a built-in hatred for people of a certain colour. The meeting was a revelation which completely changed her.

I went to a particular church once. An older

woman came over to me after the service and we became engaged in a conversation. She remarked on the greatness and goodness of Cheddi Jagan, and then began to blame all that she felt was wrong about him, on that "wicked witch of a communist woman" Janet Jagan. I have heard a few persons explain their ambivalence towards CJ, in like fashion in different words. These persons could not have known Cheddi Jagan. Nobody could influence him against his will. Janet Jagan could not have. I knew that Dr Jagan changed his position on this or that issue, but only if you could rationally state why he should.

I have no memory of her on the campaign trail in 1953 when I first heard CJ and Forbes Burnham and the rest. But I do have a distant memory of her at my grandfather's house. (I even recall with great vividness, the framed pictures on the walls and the air-stained almanac). While Dr Jagan was, in his usual style, giving his spiel to an enraptured collection of men who were being entertained by my grandfather in his usual style, Janet was engaging the women folk in a conversation about things domestic and house-wifery in a casual and most non-condescending manner imaginable. Children gawked at

her probably having never seen a white person that close before. That night she battled mosquitoes and inadequate lighting as she presented her case why people should vote for her. But she need not have tried so hard. She was speaking to the converted. She had won their hearts already.

Janet Jagan is an avid connoisseur of the arts way beyond the stage of the dilettante. While it was I who made the formal move to transform the former residence of President Forbes Burnham into Castellani House, the "home" of the national arts collection, it was she who was the prime mover behind the transformation. I remember so well the occasion of the formal opening

of Castellani House. She came with an arm in cast causing me to quip that I hoped that forcing President Jagan to come to the event did not cause her the injury. Poets, writers, dancers, sculptors, painters and playwrights can testify to her influence on them in both encouraging them and providing them with the opportunity to pursue their special interests.

She even got me to read poetry in public and to do book reviews. Hey! I like to think that I have a flair for these things, but I'd rather practise them in private. Once three of us went to a book launch, Janet, Sadie Amin and myself. None of us liked the book, but none of us wanted to say so in public. We hit upon a strategy on

how to deal with our dilemma. Janet gave a tremendous off-the-cuff talk on literature in general and Latin American writings in particular!

There are so many things that I could say, but I have to at least mention the time we went on an official visit to Jamaica. Kofi Annan was visiting UWI. Without her knowing it she almost drove the security guards up the wall! She insisted on behaving her natural style, that is, like an ordinary person. But she was a Head of State! And Heads of State do not go down to the lobby to pay their hotel bills or to browse in the hotel shops.

I wish this wonderful lady many more happy birthdays to come. *Peace!*