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 confusing 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 frantically Marxist People’s Progressive Party (PPP). This veteran of riots, bombings, jail and house arrest. This led the drive for Guyana’s independence from Britain in 1966. This editor of the Mirror newspaper in Georgetown from 1967 to 1969. 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, date-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 worked as Cheddi’s dental nurse. Radicalized by the Depression, she began to think that these people existing with too little money, too little hope and too little power. In Guyana, particularly on the sugar plantation where her father had once 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 1982 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 does. During the first few months she substituted as U.N. ambassador and had time to enjoy New York theater 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. She’ll have to deal with foreign debt accumulated during past administrations, which Cheddi sought, not always successfully, to have written off. There simply needs to be rebuilt the infrastructure—schools, hospitals, roads for farmers. Electricity is still a big problem, but Janet has promised to tackle it in the first two years of her term. While there’s a 92 percent 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 Ismael, 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 percent of whom are Indian, 37 percent 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 last 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.

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