

THOUGHTS ON MY MOTHER



Commemorative Centenary Stamp issued by the GPOC in honour of Mrs. Janet Jagan's 100th birth anniversary.

Much has been said about my mother in her political life but there were also many other aspects of her life that made her such an amazing and beautiful human being, that many may not know of.

First and foremost, she was a very kind, loving and generous mother who, even though, she had a very busy political life while I was still very young, managed to spend her spare time with my brother, Joey and I. She took us to the Georgetown Zoo and the Botanical Gardens which always held a very dear place in her heart. She also really loved taking us to the seawalls where we would walk on the beach and collect shells and driftwood. She used to use the driftwood to make pieces of art. Later in life she also enjoyed taking all her grandchildren to the same places.

Her favourites at the zoo were the Harpy Eagle, the manatees, the river otters and the cockatoos, some of the very animals she so fondly wrote about in her children stories for her grandchildren: Cheddi, Alex, Vrinda, Natasha and Avasa. She also wrote beautiful stories for my brother's birthday while she was incarcerated and a few personal poems for us, along with political poems.

Our family also spent many memorable and fun days at the black water creeks and on the beach at Bee Hive on the East Coast. Fried chicken was one of Mom's specialties for these trips. She made the best fried chicken. These were times when my parents were able to relax and enjoy time with us and other family members or with friends.

My mother had a great love for the arts, which I learned

began when she was a child of about 11. She told that she would walk far distances and travel alone on buses to visit the art museums in Chicago and to go to the beach. Telling me about it she said she was actually amazed that her parents allowed her at that age to travel around alone.

Over the years she bought paintings and works of art by Guyanese artists, sometimes just because she wanted to help them along financially and to encourage them. She was instrumental in the creation of Castellani House and in acquiring art for the national collection.

My mother had sacrificed many things in her life. I think one of the first that I know about was her decision to get married to my father. She was studying nursing at the time and she told me of her love for surgery and that if she had continued, she would have been a surgical nurse. She gave this dream up when she decided to get married, for in those days you could not be married and be a nurse. I think that's one of the reasons she advocated for women's rights in British Guiana, so women could be able to have any job and also be married. My mother would have been a very kind and caring nurse had she completed her studies. At my father's dental practice, she was his assistant and made toys to give to the kids that were his patients.

When she joined my father in British Guiana in December, 1943 she was introduced to a completely new way of life. She readily accepted my father's wishes to help his brothers and sisters. Many of my aunts and uncles lived with my parents while they attended high school and later with my parents' help, they were all able to attain higher education. Some of them would only have been 2 to 4 years younger than my mom at the time. A very dear friend of my mother, Evelyn Rayman, told me how she remembered seeing this slim, beautiful, white woman and she could not understand how she could take in all those relatives and have to live in such a small place, after coming from such a place as America.

My mother went to jail for 6 months. She wrote about this period: "Jail wasn't easy from the physical point of view. But like my husband, I treasured the quiet of jail from the furor outside. I did a lot of reading after insisting that women, like men, should have a right to have books. I also did handicrafts and my stuffed dolls and animals were sold outside."

My mother was very athletic as a young adult. She was a speed skater, and also loved archery and target shooting

but one of her biggest passions was swimming, which she continued to do until the summer of 2008, the last year she spent with us in Canada. She carried this love for sports into her political efforts in Guyana – she and my father made many private pools available to local swimmers, encouraged youth, both male and female, to participate in all forms of sports. Because these things were so dear to her heart, one of the first things that she did when she became President was to set up a new ministry – The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in 1997 separate from the Ministry of Education.

My mother was a very generous person as many can attest to. She loved to send out birthday cards and give gifts to close party comrades and their children. I could not count how many persons she helped over the years – either to find solutions to their problems, to help them get a house lot, to find a place to live, to get a job or even to help them financially in any way she could, sometimes even leaving herself short.

My mother was a very loving and dedicated wife. My parents had a very close relationship and worked very well together. They complemented each other in all aspects of life. Dad was the outgoing one, my mother preferred to be in the background, but really and truly she also did a lot of work in campaigning in the countryside especially in the Essequibo region where she was always very popular.

Mom took care of the finances and the running of the house. She cooked the meals and cleaned the house but my parents also had an equal division of labour in the house. Daddy would clear and wash the dishes and polish our wooden floors when it needed to be done. He also took care of the yard and the planting of fruit trees which was a joy for him. Theirs was a quiet life together in our house at New Haven after my brother and I left home, so many years ago. Sundays, their only day off, if they did not have meetings in the countryside, were spent quietly.

The mornings would begin with Dad in the yard and Mom cleaning the house. Lunch was Mom's Sunday meal of roasted chicken, stuffing and lots of fruits for Dad. After lunch they would both have a nap then they would sit

together on the veranda or go to the seawalls for a walk. They loved to do this and also took my children there many times.

In the evenings after dinner, Dad would end up at his desk where he wrote many of his hundreds of articles, papers and books. Mom would sit and read a book. She loved reading and left a large library of books on all sorts of topics: the classics, foreign writers, biographies, fiction, and politics, to name a few. Sometimes she would be reading several books at a time. She wrote: "By taking me to the library when I was a little girl, my father gave me one of the greatest blessings I have ever had – a love of books. Reading has been one of the great joys of my life and one, which I recognise, has carried me through periods when life was not always what I had hoped for."

This was my parents' life together, a loving couple who were able together to make so many positive changes to the lives of so many in Guyana. I am happy that over the last years when Mom was no longer deeply involved in politics, she was able to spend longer periods of time when she visited me and my family. I got to do things with her that in earlier years we could not do. I would take her out shopping especially to the grocery store where she spent a long time – the choices were many, compared to back home - to plays and museums in Toronto, out for dinners or just sitting around talking about life in general.

She continued to encourage me to design and make jewellery, which she loved to wear, especially pieces that I had made for her. It was out of her love for jewellery that I probably decided to take on that profession.

We all miss her terribly. I know anyone who had the joy to have met her and really knew who she was, misses her too.



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