

The other side of an icon

by Sadie Amin

Last Thursday, October 20, former President Janet Jagan celebrated her 85th birthday. It was certainly a milestone in every sense of the word. President Bharrat Jagdeo hosted a dinner at State House in honour of "Cde. Janet" as she is popularly known within the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and well-wishers shared a toast to this icon of the Guyanese landscape. Among the guests were close party associates, friends and relatives including both Mrs. Jagan's children, Nadira Brancier-Jagan and Cheddi Jagan, Jr. (Joey). It was a simple, no-fuss affair, just the way Mrs. Jagan likes things. Brief speeches were made by President Jagdeo, PPP's General Secretary Donald Ramotar, Nadira, Joey and a few members of the Jagan family. It was a time to show appreciation for the woman who has been in the leadership of the PPP from its inception and who is still active at all levels of the party.



Mrs Janet Jagan

Good, bad or indifferent, every Guyanese has to admit that Mrs. Jagan has had a tremendous impact and influence on our nation. She has been around and active in a variety of social and political struggles since she first came to Guyana in 1943. Her public life and achievements are well documented and known nationally and internationally. That is the public persona. What most Guyanese don't know much about is the private side of Janet Jagan - her kindness, loyalty, generosity of spirit, care and consideration for those less fortunate and most of all her

upbeat attitude to life in general.

I've only known Cde. Janet for a short period, about eight years (some of her friendships go back over fifty years). I've worked for her and enjoyed every

moment of it. She was and still is a hard but rewarding taskmistress, short on patience for slackers and chronic complainers but high in praise for hard work and commitment. This woman is a stickler for punctuality, meeting deadlines and keeping her word once she gives it yet she rarely openly complains or criticizes when others show weakness or failure. If she holds herself out to do something for a member of the public she will doggedly call every public official until the job is completed. With regard to being punctual, I remember one time having to meet her

to attend a function. I was ten minutes late and she left me. It was a wake-up call either to be five minutes early or right on time.

Some of the still lesser known facts about Janet Jagan is her love of reading and keeping up with current events worldwide. She has a voracious appetite for books, magazines and anything in print form. With her hectic schedule it's amazing that she finds time to read as much as she does. Her favourite television channels are the BBC and CNN. Once when her television couldn't access the BBC she was highly annoyed and almost cancelled her contract with the cable company. Mrs. Jagan is an avid patron of the arts and has a substantial collection of paintings and artifacts. In her zeal to support the "poor, starving artist" she will occasionally purchase pieces she isn't too fond of in order to help out. There is one artist who habitually brings around his artworks whenever he is broke and Mrs. Jagan is often too kind to turn him away. She jus-

tifies her kindness as an investment towards a future gift for someone.

This is a woman who does not like people to fuss over her. She will send flowers, a note or visit a sick friend but when it comes to her, she brushes off attention to any of her ills or woes. She won't seek medical attention for herself but will send a doctor to look in on one of her co-workers or to someone who is house-bound.

Her generosity is manifest in many ways. Anyone working at Freedom House will attest to the fact of certain indigent persons going there on a weekly basis and Janet giving them money in privacy, never letting the person lose his or her dignity. On days she can't show up and a person is scheduled to collect money, Mrs. Jagan will send the money in a packet with her driver for that person. Whenever she goes anywhere and others are in the company she will always ensure that they're taken care of. Many times she will send her driver to pick up someone or if a set of persons has to get a ride she will squish her and them like sardines in the car and drop everyone off to their doors. She did this even when she was president.

Cde. Janet has a memory like clockwork for remem-



phone call, card or an appropriate gift always arrives on that special day. And believe me when I say, her birthday list is quite lengthy. In particular, she shops in advance for her five grandchildren's gifts. Once while we were holidaying in St. Kitts, Mrs. Jagan bought some prints and an antique pen for two of her grandchildren even though their birthdays were months away.

Janet Jagan may be eighty-five but her wits and faculty are sharply intact. She has a few medical conditions like most people her age but that doesn't cause her to be grouchy or behave as if helplessly. Her independence and zest for life makes one marvel at her ability to keep going. One time I mentioned helping out some "little, old ladies" and her quick reply was "I hope I'm not a little, old lady." That is definitely nother category, not when she can out-swim me any day or stay up late at coffee shops. Her category is unique to her alone. She is an icon who has left a tangible and indelibly positive imprint on all who have known her. *Once again, Happy Birthday and Long*