



The Laureate magazine is published biennially by the Anthony N. Sabga Awards, Caribbean Excellence. It is a collection of long essays by all our Laureates awarded over the preceding two-year period. Each has been deemed worthy of receiving the Caribbean's most prestigious award.

The Awards are funded and administered by the ANSA McAL Foundation, the autonomous, philanthropic arm of the ANSA McAL Group.

To learn more about exceptional Caribbean nationals and to nominate outstanding individuals, please visit ansacaribbeanawards.com



Dr Anthony N Sabga, ORTT

Founder of the Anthony N Sabga Awards, Caribbean Excellence
(1923-2017)

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CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

Every year, after our Laureates are selected and announced, we ask them to submit long essays destined for this biennial magazine. The parameters of the request are broad: Write about your work and life.

Most write about their upbringings, their first inclinations towards their livelihoods and the stellar work they have accomplished. Through their essays, we learn that they share common traits: strong work ethics, hard-won skills, aptitude and a particular strain of resilience. Where others might have folded, they have persevered.

These are exceptional people in their fields today, but few, if any, knew exactly where they would end up.

In this edition of The Laureate, novelist Marlon James writes about his internal struggle to become a writer while toiling on advertising copy in 1990s Jamaica. Environmental consultant Shyam Nokta notes that he had to choose between accepting a Fulbright scholarship and starting a small environmental consultancy in Guyana, long before the business he opened made him our Entrepreneurship Laureate for 2022. Digital

entrepreneur Anuska Sonai recalls working long hours in unpaid roles in Suriname, ever hopeful that she was opening doors for other women in tech.

Dr Kim Jebodhsingh recalls the tremendous challenge of completing her medical training during a difficult pregnancy and twin birth before specialising as an oculoplastic surgeon whose greatest satisfaction has been the immediate and dramatic results of her surgeries. Molecular virologist Professor Christine Carrington describes how people tried to dissuade her from pursuing basic research that advances human knowledge rather than seeking answers to very specific problems through applied research. She has since played a key role in the region's COVID-19 response by leading a lab team that sequenced the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Writer Joanne C. Hillhouse describes her father, employed at an Antiguan hotel, begging for time to pay her school fees. Joanne is now the published author of eight books. Obstetrician/gynaecologist Dr Adesh Sirjusingh recalls sensing his future when neighbours started calling him "Young Doc" while he was still tending to his father's goats after school in Dinsley Village, Trinidad. He is responsible for leading a team that dramatically reduced maternal and infant mortality in T&T.

And plant breeder Dr Mahendra Persaud from Berbice, Guyana, remembers being penalised at university for handing in hand-written

assignments because he could not afford to print them. Dr Persaud, by the way, is now Chief Scientist of a team that has increased Guyana's rice production by 50%, transforming the fortunes of thousands of Guyanese rice farmers.

A common theme of these essays is that there will always be detractors and moments of self-doubt. Those who rise to excellence have found ways to overcome them both. The founder of these Awards, my father, faced numerous challenges of his own while expanding a small import business into a Caribbean-wide employer of over 6,000 people. He was always very proud of this programme.

At the Anthony N. Sabga Awards, Caribbean Excellence, we shine the spotlight of the Caribbean's most prestigious prize on remarkable individuals, showing the way to more work that uplifts the entire region. Sincere congratulations to our recent inductees. We look forward to working with you in furthering your pursuit of excellence.

Finally, for the young ones reading this publication, we so desperately need your ambition, to be not the next Christine Carrington, Marlon James or Mahendra Persaud (though those are laudable goals!) but the best version of whatever you aspire to be.

Maybe someday, you will grace the pages of this publication yourselves.

Mr Andrew N. Sabga,
Chairman - The ANSA McAL
Foundation



OUR 2022 LAUREATES

Marlon James (Arts & Letters) - Jamaica

Shyam Nokta (Entrepreneurship) - Guyana

Anuskha Sonai, HOYS (Knight) (Public & Civic Contributions, Joint) - Suriname

Dr Kim Jebodhsingh (Public & Civic Contributions, Joint) - Barbados

Prof Christine Carrington, CMT (Science & Technology) - Trinidad & Tobago



OUR 2023 LAUREATES

Joanne C. Hillhouse (Arts & Letters) - Antigua & Barbuda
Dr Adesh Sirjusingh (Public & Civic Contributions) - Trinidad & Tobago
Dr Mahendra Persaud, A.A. (Science & Technology) - Guyana

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AWARDS



The Awards were established in 2005 by the late Dr Anthony N. Sabga, founder of the ANSA McAL Group. Since then, 57 Caribbean nationals have been awarded in the fields of Arts & Letters, Entrepreneurship, Public & Civic Contributions, and Science & Technology. Their careers have been supported with over TT\$28 million in funding.

Standing Laureates include a St Lucian sculptor, a Jamaican priest committed to improving the lives of inner-city youth, and an astrobiologist from Trinidad and Tobago whose work on microorganisms living in the Pitch Lake is internationally recognised.

Today, an Anthony N. Sabga Award, Caribbean Excellence comes with prize money equivalent to TT\$500,000 and an Anthony N. Sabga medal. The Awards confer the recognition of public and peers, and provide our Laureates with the network of a wider Caribbean community.



(Top) Dr Anthony Sabga and Mr Norman Sabga present Prof Dave Chadee with his Laureate medal in 2013

(Bottom) Programme Director, Mrs Maria Superville-Neilson, at the 2013 Awards ceremony



MARLON JAMES

Our Arts & Letters Laureate, 2022

Marlon James is the Booker prize-winning author of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. The 52-year-old Jamaica-born novelist now resides in Brooklyn, but his body of work is rooted in the Caribbean and told from the perspective of a writer born and raised in the middle-class community of Portmore, Jamaica.

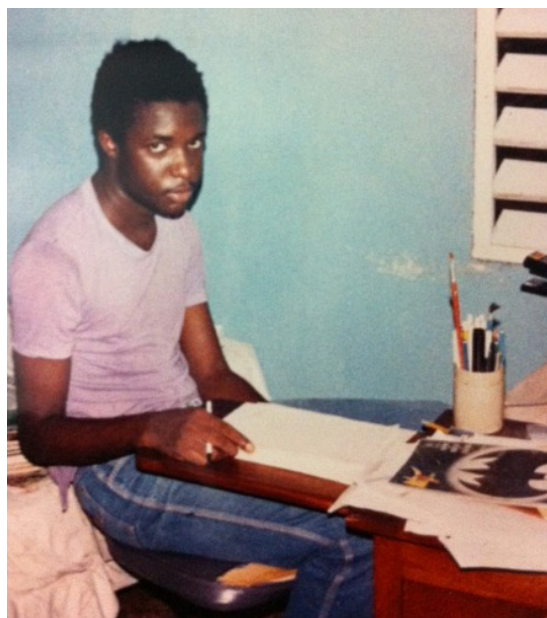
Confession, the cliché goes, is good for the soul, so we might as well open with one: I never begin a story at the beginning, not fiction, not even a true story. Make no mistake—the first page of my novel is the beginning of the story, because history and novels based on history usually start with point of origin. But reading is not writing, and the starting point of my writing adventure is never the beginning of the story. This might be because beginnings, while crucial, are not always interesting, even if they are intriguing, are a spark opposed to a raging flame. Think of the illicit pleasure of stumbling into the middle of an argument or taking your seat in the cinema after the movie has started or dropping in the middle of the greatest song you have ever heard and not knowing who is singing. The thrill comes from arriving where tension is at the highest, emotions are the rawest, conflict has gone from heating to hot, and your head is reeling from the whiplash tension of moving forwards yet catching up at the same time. The past then becomes a mystifying thing, compelling us to know, only because we are in the present wondering, how the hell did we get here?

I am tempted to begin somewhere between 1991 and 1993, post-twenty but pre-twenty-five. At 23, I was sure of even less than I was at 12, but the one thing I knew for certain was that I was not a writer. I would not have called myself one, even though writing was all that I was being paid to do.

1991 found me graduating from the University of the West Indies with a classic “my mother does not know how I will make a living from this” degree, also called English. Found myself being the key phrase here, as how I managed to graduate from University still confounds me. Within three months, I was working as a copywriter for Jamaica’s leading advertising agency, again not quite sure how I got there, as I had applied for the job of graphic artist (which I was nowhere near qualified to do), and it was only near the bottom of my thin resume that writing was listed as an ‘additional skill’. I was writing advertising copy five days a week yet would not call myself a writer. To get to that point, one would have to start in the middle of the story, so let’s begin.

The letter landed on my doorstep in 2002, the actual month now lost to me. I was shocked that any publisher from New York would go through the trouble to send me so much as a post card, and equally taken aback that it traveled all the way across the sea and, more impossibly, through Jamaica’s treacherous postal system to my Lady Musgrave Road apartment. I am conditioned to believe that nobody takes the trouble to deliver bad news, and news that

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overcomes impossible odds to find you must indeed be good, so I was celebrating this thing before opening it. At this point, every agent, editor and publisher who had received my query letter seeking someone to publish my first novel had either passed via email or not bothered to reply. Of the six letters sent out six weeks before, this was the only reply, and it was mailed to me, and, by letter standards, the envelope had serious heft. Not that I had ever won anything in my life, but I was led to believe that while no is just a two-letter word, yes was several pages long, and came wrapped in a pretty envelope that would congratulate me on my talent, thrill me with a weighty contract and scandalise me with a cheque in the millions for what was sure to be a best-selling debut. I placed the letter on my kitchen counter to save for dinner.

The stakes were higher than just a publishing deal, though I would have never admitted it at the time. I was making a living as a writer, but had written myself into a corner, financially and artistically. Financially because I was living hand to mouth, having struck out on my own, and making a success of it until I wasn't. Artistically because creatively, I was running near empty; selling slogans that I did not believe in for products I would never use. There is a corner writers write themselves into, the same space where, sooner or later, artists paint themselves and dancers stumble into. You know you are in this space when you ask yourself, are you a graphic artist, or an artist doing graphics? A video dancer or a dancer doing videos? A copywriter, or a writer doing copy? Either answer is fine, but decades could pass by before you decide what that answer should be. People who are the former proceed as they always have done, happy to be doing exactly what they are supposed to. But for those who fall in the latter, tough questions come without warning, and if you are lucky, they come in time because that is the one thing that is always running out. There is only so far one can create

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under compromise or by committee and still call oneself an artist. I was surrounded by creative people who thought they would eventually game the system. Men and women who had directed commercials for decades, who still thought they had a feature film in them. Musicians that spent decades composing 30-second jingles, and who thought they could compose a symphony or a pop song. Writers who knew the seven words to get customers to buy a new bar of soap but were floundering now that they were trying to write the great Jamaican novel. I watched every single one of them try and fail. And then I watched others who saw where this journey would most likely end and jumped ship. To be both artist doing graphics and a writer doing copy, I needed an exit strategy. I was desperate; the company I needed to escape was my own.

And yet my literary ambitions were too low to be called ambitious. I wasn't trying to be a writer, and I certainly wasn't trying to publish a book. I wanted a space for writing that was mine alone, not for crafting lines for a bank or insurance company to prove that I was good at making them better. Words that left my head to land on the page intact, free from consideration of what other people would like, want or approve. I wanted to make art, I guess, though I wouldn't have called it such at the

time. Like Virginia Woolf, I wanted a room of my own, even if it was just in my own head. I told no one that I was writing a novel because, at the time, I was just writing myself into becoming a writer. Prose was a way to escape reality, but to confront it as well. The reality of who I was, where I was and what I was. Writing journals allowed me to face myself on the page, even if I didn't know what to do with what I saw. Writing fiction allowed me to live more than one life, even as I felt stuck in the one I was living in.

Somebody once said that the trouble with reading Tolstoy's War and Peace was that every time you closed the book, hundreds of people still lingered in your bedroom, refusing to leave. I began to write because I wanted to fill my room with people who would take me to worlds I had never been





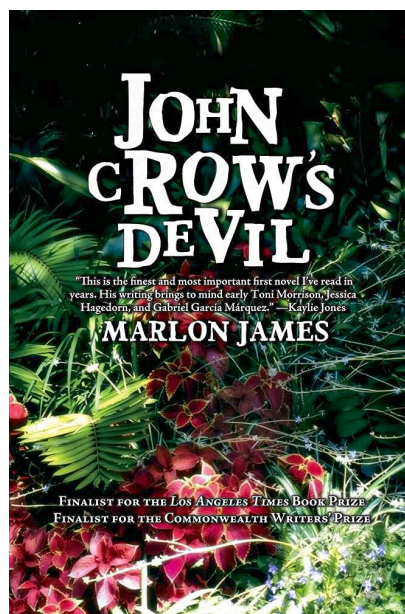
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to, lure me into experiences I could never afford, immerse myself in pleasures I could never risk, and reel from staggering losses I could never bear. In writing about other people, I was inching ever so slightly towards myself.

It would come late, the realisation that the future was a concept I could write myself into. Indeed, it was writing that took me to America, making that migration possible with a career that supported my writing instead of undercutting it. But before that, I was simply writing myself into being, using prose to explore a version of me that lived out loud—and paid the price for it. The me that would dance with danger, unshackle the past and head into an uncertain future. Who knows what will happen? Lottery or car crash, as Bjork sings in “Possibly Maybe”, my anthem at the time. The me that could be simply, even boringly, gay, a word that I wouldn’t have dared to use with anyone, especially myself.

John Crow’s Devil, my first novel, came out of that period. A curious

thing happens when you write a novel, especially after thinking all the while that you were writing it for just yourself. The act of writing a book is incredibly intimate and personal, but once finished, you want everyone to read it. Which is just as well because once you complete any work of art, it ceases to be yours. I wanted people to read my story, and in effect, read me, even though the novel at first glance had nothing to do with my life. It was set in the early 1950s, when my parents were still teenagers, and in a rural area, whereas my upbringing was demonstrably suburban. But it was about aberrant religion run amok and the destruction it caused by using ignorance, hatred and fear to mutate



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On one side, nothing,
on the other, just three
words,
Not For Us.
”

into a cult, something that current Jamaica still struggles with. It was part historical novel and part fable, but it was also me coming to terms with my deeply conflicted relationship with religion, and the ways in which that conflict factored into identity, sexuality, racial consciousness and my country’s relationship to colonialism and power.

I can’t remember when I started sending queries to agents and publishers. There was no established writer to tell me how it was done, or to tell me that I should mail to agents, not publishers, so I culled names and addresses from the internet and mailed out queries, six at a time. There was no one to tell me if this was the right or wrong way to go, so I continued. The first responses were all rejections, but I was excited to get any response at all. And then came that letter from a reputable independent press. It was heavy as letters go, but that mystery solved itself as soon as I opened it. Not a stack of papers presenting a contract, but a thick, cream-coloured card. On one side, nothing; on the other, just three words,

Not For Us.

I have a way of blocking out bad news—not successfully, but enough to forget if the words were handwritten, typed or printed. What I do remember is the clipped coldness of it. *They hated it so much that they couldn’t even give me a proper sentence.* It wasn’t that rejection letters were strange to me, as those were the only letters I had received up to that point, but something about this one, its brevity, and refusal to explain



itself stopped me cold. That card in my hand prompted me for the first time to wonder how many rejections I had read over the past year. Or years.

After all, I did have a process. I would mail out six to eight query letters to agents, editors and publishers, telling them about my first novel, what it was about, who the book was for, and why they should publish it. Then I would wait anywhere from six weeks to two months, toss aside the no's and not-nows, then post another batch. It wasn't until the Not For Us card that I stopped to tally how many rejections I had gotten, and that number, when I finally added it up, was devastating.

Seventy-eight.

I wish I could remember how I reacted to the news, but as I've said before, my mind has a way of blocking out even a whiff of distress. I wondered which was worse: blindly ignoring all these previous rejections until the final figure came out of nowhere, or paying attention and losing the will to make it to seventy-five. Either way, my conclusion would have been the same. If so many people, some of them among the smartest and most successful in the industry, thought this was not worth publishing, why should I believe it was?

I did not. This is usually the part where

interviewers who have heard this story ask for the secret to my willpower, and how I persevered after such devastating news. I wish I had done so, but rejection had reached critical mass, and I believed the critics. I printed out one final copy of the manuscript and burned it. Then I deleted the file. Not content with just that, I tracked down the file on my friends' computers and deleted those as well. I erased every email correspondence, deleted the query letter and closed that chapter in my life. I was done with writing, but writing, it turned out, was not done with me.

Enter the Calabash Literary Festival. Founded in 2001 by the novelist Colin Channer, the poet Kwame Dawes and the producer Justine Henzell, the festival had grown in those few short years into a world-class event, bringing the literary world to Jamaica, and Jamaica's literary scene to the world. But Calabash was more than just an event. It was a "way-too-brief" oasis, in what could feel like a deserted literary landscape, and a tantalising glimpse—if only for three days—of what the literary life could be like. The Calabash International Literary Festival Trust which produced the event, also produced publishing seminars and writing workshops, creating opportunities for Jamaican writers and poets who would never have had them otherwise. The distinguished poet Ishion Hutchinson also came out of these workshops. They wanted me to return, and it was the last place I wanted to be.

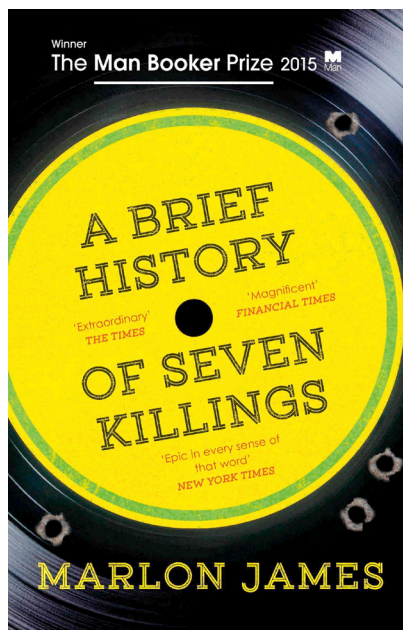
This was 2003, the second annual workshop. Between the first and second, I had gone from promising young writer to one who denied such a thought ever occurred to me. But I knew how much time and money went into putting on a free workshop and did not want to disappoint the trust, who could have invited anyone else. I went to the workshop simply to get through it. The workshop leader was Kaylie Jones, a last-minute substitute,



The Honourable Steadman Fuller, CD, JP Deputy Governor-General of Jamaica with Laureate Marlon James.

and a distinguished writer behind several bestselling novels. She was also the daughter of the legendary novelist James Jones. I don't know if I was more talented than everybody else, or was simply hungrier, but I knew every reference she made and had read all the books she mentioned. And while I did not think that the writing I did during the workshop was any good, she did, and asked if I was working on anything else. No, because I'm not a writer, I said. It would have ended there had the other writers, who remembered me from the year before, not said 'he's lying'. He wrote a book but doesn't want you to see it. Jones did not even wait for me to object before she insisted that I show her my manuscript and would not leave the country until I did. I knew that restoring a file nearly 12 months deleted was impossible but tried anyway. None of my friends had a copy of the file, which was a surprise to them since they had no memory of deleting it. Having remembered how many times I had emailed the file, I found the novel in a long out of use Outlook Express outbox, printed it out

“
... he's lying. He wrote a book but doesn't want you to see it.
”



and gave it to Kaylie Jones the next day.

The rest is indeed history, her falling in love with the manuscript, being appalled that it was not published and sending it to her own publisher, Johnny Temple at Akashic books, who immediately decided to publish it. The novel nobody wanted came out in September 2005 and became a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Books Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' Regional Prize. My second novel, The Book Of Night Women, published by Riverhead Books in 2009, won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critic's Circle Award. My third novel, A Brief History of Seven Killings, won the 2015

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I honestly don't know, I said. I don't think there is anything else. This is it. I am a writer.
”



Booker Prize and became a bestseller, and my fourth, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, won the Los Angeles Times Ray Bradbury Prize for Science and Speculative Fiction.

It was during the *Night Women's* press cycle that a journalist asked what I would be doing if I wasn't a writer. Up to that point, I had been a copywriter, designer, illustrator, locations scout, producer, sign painter, teacher, typist, playwright and DJ, but in coming up with an answer, I was dumbstruck. I could not think of anything else, and it was not for lack of trying. I could only look at him as seconds flew by with neither camera man nor director knowing what to do. I honestly don't know, I said. I don't think there is anything else. This is it. I am a writer. Two books and several years had to pass before I could call myself one. I could go on about what happened next with subsequent books, but that takes us to the end of the story, and if you remember, we have yet to get to the beginning.

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Back in my teenage years,
I had only one requirement
for a book, that it be next.

”
That beginning was November 24, 1970, in St. Andrew, Jamaica. My mother was about to become one of the first Jamaican policewomen to reach the rank of detective, while my father was about to work his last year as a constable, switching to law in 1973 and becoming an attorney in 1978. The running joke in my family was that my mother put people in jail only to have my father take them out. The early 70s saw the rise of a new class in Jamaica that crested in the 80s: educated, many of them at the tertiary level, earning substantially more than their parents, solidly middle class but not rich. People who lived in the suburbs, which was as new as they were. There is a joke that I often make, the only joke that

draws as much laughter in Port of Spain as it does in London or Oslo, that if you came of age in the 1980s then it really didn't matter where you grew up, because every single teenager of the 80s went through the same 80s. We all grew up in the suburbs with two working parents. We were all new middle class. We were all raised by television. We all wondered how Michael Jackson did the moonwalk and when nuclear war would finally hit us. And we all had to navigate an adolescence of frequent and endlessly repeatable boredom.

But not every Jamaican teenager in the 80s navigated the decade the same way. Even if I did not think of myself as different, there were schoolmates and neighbours, cooler children, kids that other kids listen to, telling them that I was odd, weird, different in ways they did not like. I'm too old to remember if the world pushed me towards books, if I ran to them, or if books were simply in the right place at the right time, but the hunger to read my way into any life but this one consumed me from as early as I could remember. And by books, I mean everything. Nowadays, it seems strange to some that I have such an omnivorous attitude to literature, with none of the snobbery one would expect from a “highbrow” author. But back in my teenage years, I had only one requirement for a book, that it be next. Books were never easy to come by, so I bought, exchanged, borrowed (in some cases, without telling the lender) pretty much any and everything. Big historical epics like *Shogun* and *the Haj*, so-called trashy novels like *The Carpetbaggers* and *Lace*, superhero comics like *Spiderman*, *Teen Titans*, and my beloved *X-men*, which would go on to shape my worldview more profoundly than any book I have ever read. Action novels, mystery novels, science fiction, horror and fantasy. I would come to realise that my knowledge of cinema was not cinema at all, but often the novelisation of the film that one would see on a pharmacy magazine



rack beside the romance novels and chewing gum.

My parents encouraged reading, but more importantly for a child who loved to discover secrets, they left books around for me to find, stumble over and sometimes steal away. From my father's desk, I read Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shakespeare and Kahlil Gibran (though I didn't understand a single word). From my mother, O. Henry, Collier's Encyclopedia, and the Reader's Digest annual collection of short stories. From both, the books they assumed a child would never find. I would befriend other children to get closer to their books. Sherlock Holmes, Oliver Twist and Robin Hood came from other bookshelves—I've forgotten whose. And not every story came from a book. The oral tradition stayed vibrant in my house, with my grandfather telling us Anansi stories,

with the same characters falling into very different predicaments each week. Not only did these stories stay with me, but I would go on to tell a version of them forty-three years later with my novel *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. As for books, the choice was always obvious. I could spend the day hoping the cooler children would ask me to play football with them, or I could open a book and immediately cast myself out to wild sea with the wickedly charming Long John Silver and be marooned with the sad and terrifying Ben Gunn.

Eventually, all this reading led to the books that made me want to write books. These were not always great books (though some of them were), or even my favourites (though some of them are), but they were the books that pushed me to pick up a pen and write. Books I wished I had written

because I wanted to set off in others the same spark they set off in me. A novel like *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, which made me dream about a world thoroughly foreign to my own, one that I could get to with words despite that world being the Midwest and that author being as racist as they come. A novel like Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, which to me remains the most convincing slice of Jamaican life I have ever read, despite the novel being set in the Philippines.

But to focus only on books that I came across on my own would be to downplay the role teachers have played in my life and in my writing. I was lucky to make it to the high school I applied to, Wolmer's Boys School. I was even luckier to have teachers who not only taught me books, but the far more difficult lesson of how to love them. *Huckleberry Finn*, the



novel that taught me that voice could be a narrative's most powerful tool, was a book I studied for exams. Tom Jones, a book I did not study in school but read because it was on the exam syllabus, taught me that plot was both the backbone and the engine of story. The Year in San Fernando and Brother Man taught me that there was indeed literature with people who looked and sounded like me.

This is a crucial point, and it says something that it appears so late in this essay. The discovery of Caribbean authors led to the discovery of my own voice, and both came quite late. Until I read Caribbean and African literature, I took it for granted that people who looked and sounded like me did not appear in books. I had even accepted it as a form of backwardness, proof that we were not to appear on the stage

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of great stories. The world of literature was the world where snow fell on skin almost as white. Where I would be homesick for places I have never lived, like London. And that I would know London far more than Port of Spain or Lagos. That the recognition of self in literature was as easily taken for granted by white people and the constant absence was taken for granted by black. It meant that I could read and experience literature but never truly identify with it. That I could read and write the English language but never take possession of it. We still see the evidence of this in the language we speak and write, perhaps even in this essay. A servile structure of words, a quaint verbosity, a reliance on passive, even obsequious voice, an overall timidity with English, as if we are borrowing it. There was a time when I was too fearful to bend words, twist them, even violate them—all essential to keeping language alive.

I still remember by name the teachers who have had a lasting effect on me. Mr Bryan, my sixth form Literature teacher, taught me how to love books by letting us know on the first day of class how much he envied us who were about to read a great novel like *Pride and Prejudice* for the first time. Daphne Chin, who had the ingenious idea to teach her kindergarten students the primary school curriculum because she knew what our brains were capable of. Annette Leyow, the fifth form Literature teacher who introduced me



History can tell us, sometimes in unexpected ways, what happened to us. But literature tells us how we bore the weight of it, how it transformed us

to both Mark Twain and V.S. Naipaul. Victor Chang, the university professor who centred Caribbean literature in my reading by introducing me to Earl Lovelace and Derek Walcott. Not every reading lesson was a literature lesson, and not every book I devoured was fiction. Critics and scholars usually refer to me as a historical novelist, which is testimony to the huge impact of my history teachers, including Wolmer's own principal at the time, E.C. Barnett.

There is a school of thought about literature which holds that it should be a window, looking out at the world as it is. Not only is this a grossly limited idea of the power of books, but it ignores how important it is to make sense of a past that sometimes defies common

sense, to see and judge it correctly, and to un-erase the erasure of those whom history has a habit of passing over. To be a Caribbean novelist is to respond to erasure, which is why even our most forward-thinking writers cannot help but look behind. I still bristle at the term 'historical novelist' largely because the 70s and 80s are fresh to me, even if it was forty years ago. But all my novels, regardless of when they are set, struggle to get out from under the crushing weight of history, whether it was colonialism, slavery, or what came before both. They all examine the weight of the past on people that our history books leave behind, to see how they chafe against events that can seem bigger than them. For a history that ignores the people who bear the

brunt of its impact is not a history at all. This is why I still believe literature is important, even for those who do not read. History can tell us, sometimes in unexpected ways, what happened to us. But literature tells us how we bore the weight of it, how it transformed us, for both good and bad, and how these larger-than-life events might have both crushed and lifted our individual spirits. I tell my students that yes, we were all at some point born, all went to school and go to work, all fell in and out of love and all mourn the deaths of loved ones. I can't promise you that you will ever be the greatest writer in the world, but you can be the greatest you that has ever lived. That your experiences are worthy of being told for the simple fact that you've had them. That we never create stories, we find them. And that while literature can feel like a privilege, especially when it denies us, the simple fact that we still have our voices means that it is still our right. In English we speaking, the Poet Mervyn Morris once wrote.

So mek we tell plenty story.

SHYAM NOKTA

Our Entrepreneurship Laureate, 2022

Shyam Nokta is an environmental consultant with a profound love of Guyana's natural environment, gained through childhood play in the 'backdam' and trips to the interior with his father, a well-known politician. His company, Environmental Management Consultants (EMC), arose from his realisation that multinationals, local businesses and the government of Guyana needed stewards to instruct them in environmental best practice in a country that is still 80% forest.

When I was told last year that I was being considered for a prestigious Anthony N Sabga Award, Guyana and the rest of the world were still grappling with COVID-19. The global pandemic had brought significant changes to our way of life. The confinement made me reflect on the fragility of life and brought new appreciation for family, friendships and community. It was also a period in which questions were posed on how we value the fragile relationship between man and the environment, and development and the environment.

Notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic, Guyana continued to experience unprecedented success in oil and gas discoveries. The Government was unveiling new initiatives for the recovery, growth and expansion of the country's economy while underscoring its commitment to a low-carbon growth path and the principles set out in its Low Carbon Development Strategy. The pandemic had brought more global focus on the environment, climate change, recovery from COVID-19 and poverty alleviation—issues that we were confronting here too, which made me realise that much of what I had pursued since childhood was now a reality. There was now a clear recognition of the value of the environment and why we need to protect, preserve and maintain nature, even as we advance

development efforts.

The company I started, Environmental Management Consultants Inc. (EMC), has as its principal focus, "providing environmental services, promoting green growth", a theme most appropriate today as Governments, Private Sector and Civil Society look to improve their performance and put the necessary measures and practices in place to protect the environment.

The journey that I started in 2003 has not always been smooth sailing, and there were times when there was resistance to our advice, but we persisted. To have a platform such as the Anthony Sabga Awards recognise the body of work that EMC does, and to be able to share our experience on this stage, to be able to bring new awareness to the environmental challenges that confront not just Guyana but the Caribbean Region and the world at large and also to share our successes with the initiatives we have promoted and the solutions we have crafted for our clients, is truly a blessing.

If someone had told me that almost 20 years after choosing between a Fulbright scholarship to pursue doctoral studies and starting a small consultancy, I would have arrived at this moment, I would have doubted them. This is how life is, and sometimes it is not the cards you're dealt but the

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Whenever he could, my father would take me with him on his trips to Guyana’s interior regions. Those visits sparked a deep and abiding curiosity in me about the forests and animals that lived there.

hand that you play that makes the difference.

EMC started as a small environmental service provider focused on supporting environmental compliance. It started as a one-person outfit operating out of the lower flat of my parents’ home. Today, it is one of Guyana’s premier environmental service providers to the private sector, NGOs and Governments and has evolved from a single employee to a team of more than thirty national and international experts.

The services EMC offers include environmental support for projects in key sectors, including oil and gas, mining, agriculture, fisheries, forestry, energy, manufacturing and infrastructure through the preparation of environmental and social impact assessments; environmental management plans; conducting biodiversity assessments and compliance monitoring and reporting. EMC’s work at the level of

policy, strategy and planning includes assisting in meeting obligations of multilateral environmental agreements such as UN Conventions on climate change, biodiversity and land degradation.

I grew up in Ogle—a small village on the East Coast of Demerara with my parents. I have lived there for most of my life. My father, Harripersaud Nokta, was an active politician during those years and my mother Tasleane, a housewife. It is my mother who for most of my early, middle and high school life taught me and instilled in me discipline, diligence, humility and hard work. My father’s commitment to working for a better Guyana often took him to far-flung regions within our country and he instilled in me quite early the importance of serving my country. I spent many childhood days fishing and swimming in the nearby canals, venturing into the Ogle backdam and playing outdoor games with children from the neighbourhood.



Current Chair of the Guyana Country Nominating Committee, Mr Alim Hosein, with 2023 laureates Mr Shyam Nokta and Ms Anuska Sonai, along with former Guyana CNC Chair, Mr Al Creighton.

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My decision to pursue Environmental Studies was met with some scepticism by my parents who thought that since I was doing science, perhaps I should have opted for medicine rather than ‘sanitation’, which is what a career in the environment was seen as at that time.

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Mr Shyam Nokta accepts his citation from Prof Compton Bourne, Chairman of the Regional Eminent Persons Panel.



Over the next few years, I immersed myself in the field of conservation and tourism development.

As an only child, I was loved and had support from my parents and the community. Whenever he could, my father would take me with him on his trips to Guyana's interior regions. Those visits sparked a deep and abiding curiosity in me about the forests and animals that lived there.

My curiosity and love for the environment and science followed me to secondary school where I, along with a few friends, started a Science Club. Soon after, we entered the 1992 National Inter-School Science Fair and, with the help of Dr Joshua Ramsammy, built a greenhouse model that demonstrated how deforestation increases temperature. We were overjoyed when we learnt our model had won second place.

Around this time, Guyana's neighbour Brazil was hosting what was dubbed the Earth Summit 1992 in Rio De Janeiro, and the global conversation was focused on the state of the environment. Guyana was already ahead in tangible efforts to protect the environment. In 1989, through then President Hugh Desmond Hoyte, it had gifted Iwokrama—one million acres of prime rainforest—to the Commonwealth to set up an International Centre for research and development focusing on sustainable forest management and conservation of its biodiversity. In 1992, newly elected President Cheddi Jagan shared his views about a New Global Human Order in which the environment was a key pillar, and where he recognised the need for developed countries to compensate developing countries for

More importantly, I was a principal member of the team that negotiated the Guyana-Norway Partnership and was responsible for coordinating its implementation.

maintaining their forests as the lungs of the earth. Similar views were being shared globally.

These activities and the global conversation had lasting effects on me and my choice of career path. By this time, having completed my Caribbean Examinations Council exams or CXC, as it was then called, I was fully committed to the sciences but at 15, I was too young to attend university so I opted for A-levels instead. Having completed this, I wanted to pursue studies in environmental science but at the time, it was not offered at the University of Guyana (UG), so I chose Civil Engineering. By the end of my first semester, as luck would have it, UG began offering a Bachelor's Degree in Environmental Studies, a programme which was sponsored by the European Union. And so I made the switch. My decision to pursue Environmental Studies was met with some scepticism by my parents who thought that since I was doing science, perhaps I should have opted for medicine rather than 'sanitation', which is what a career in the environment was seen as at that time.

My time at UG was fulfilling. I helped to establish a students' environmental group ECOTRUST, which still continues to this day and I was among the first



batch of graduants in Environmental Studies.

After completing my Bachelor's Degree, I joined the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as an Environmental Officer and was among its first group of employees. The Agency had recently been set up following the passage of the landmark Environmental Protection Act of 1996.

While at the EPA, one of the sectors I was responsible for was tourism. I subsequently pursued a Diploma in Tourism Studies, recognising the link between tourism and the environment and Guyana's immense potential for nature-based tourism.

In 1999, I was awarded a scholarship under the International Development Bank (IDB)-Japan Scholarship Programme to pursue a Master of

Science in Environmental Assessment and Management in England. Having done well academically, I was selected to be part of a delegation hosted by the Government of Japan for a familiarisation and orientation tour of Japanese culture and society. This was an experience I still cherish today.

On my return to Guyana, I joined the Iwokrama International Centre as a Professional Development Fellow for Protected Area Management. Iwokrama was in its formative years at that time, and the opportunity allowed me to be part of cutting-edge approaches to planning and managing wilderness areas, training rangers and field personnel, and biodiversity assessments and conservation. As part of its mandate, Iwokrama encouraged its employees to contribute to national efforts and this gave me the opportunity to serve



President of Guyana, Irfaan Ali, presents Mr Shyam Nokta with his medal.

as a part-time lecturer in Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism Planning and Management at the Tourism Unit of the University of Guyana. Having been a student, this new role challenged me to bring a more practical and interactive approach to the classroom while exposing the students to emerging trends and issues. I still feel pride and satisfaction when I see many of my former students taking up leadership and senior positions in the tourism sector and championing tourism initiatives.

While at Iwokrama, I was invited to be part of the National Protected Areas Secretariat, a team mobilised by the EPA to help support the advancement of protected areas and the setting up of a national system of park and protected areas. Through this involvement, I met the

famous turtle conservationist Dr Peter Pritchard and his local team of indigenous marine turtle protectors and also tourism entrepreneur and environmentalist Ms Annette Arjoon and other like-minded persons. Together, we became the founding members of the Guyana Marine Turtle Conservation Society (GMTCS), which spearheaded turtle conservation work at Shell Beach, a 90-mile stretch of uninhabited beach along Guyana's Atlantic coast. Due to its work and presence on the ground, GMTCS was requested by the EPA to lead efforts towards the setting up of Shell Beach as a National Protected Area, an initiative in which I later played a lead role after joining GMCS as its Technical Director.

Over the next few years, I immersed myself in the field of conservation

and tourism development. I chaired the Board of the Kaieteur National Park, Guyana's first national park, which was established during the colonial period and where the world-renowned Kaieteur Falls can be found. Overseeing the management of the park had its challenges, amongst them managing the threats from illegal mining, balancing tourism development within high-value conservation areas of the park and securing partnerships and benefits for local indigenous villages in proximity to the park. During my time as chair, I used the opportunity to travel overland to many remote corners of the park, to enjoy its landscapes, abundant biodiversity and waterways and to meet and interact with the indigenous villagers and local miners.

My involvement in conservation continued when I was appointed In-Country Representative of Fauna and Flora International, which allowed me to support training and capacity development of personnel for the setting up and management of protected areas across Guyana and to continue to work with indigenous villages.

I was part of the team that helped craft the legislation for setting up the National Protected Areas System and the Protected Areas Commission, for which I served as its first chairman. It was an achievement to be part of realising Shell Beach as one of several legally established protected areas and to help set up the institution that would manage Guyana's principal natural treasures.

My work in conservation over this period helped me recognise more fully the impact of the extractive industry on the environment, and at the same time, the need to address livelihood issues at the local level. I understood in a practical way the concept of conservation being about people as much as it is about flora and fauna and ecosystems and the

need to support diversifying the local economy if conservation was going to succeed. It also made me realise that there was a gap in the way conservation, biodiversity and the environment was being taught at the tertiary level, as there was little opportunity for students to visit and experience the abundant biodiversity present in our natural areas. Much of this had to do with the remoteness of such areas, the high cost of getting there and the lack of facilities. This reminded me of an idea I'd had since my time at university, an idea that had stayed with me all these years and which I felt it was time to bring to life: the setting up of a private protected area for environmental and conservation awareness.

There were few, if any, efforts at establishing a private protected area, but I felt it could be done. My father's travels came in handy as he was able to advise on areas that are close by but which offer a natural setting. After considering several options, I decided to pursue a forested area on the left bank of the Essequibo River, in the vicinity of the village of Saxacalli. From a modest start, after 20 years, it is still a work in progress. The Saxacalli Rainforest Centre has hosted students and researchers who, through research, field surveys and biodiversity assessments, have helped provide a better understanding of the rainforest and the species in the area, which include viable timber species; a unique mix of epiphytes; fauna such as jaguars, giant anteater, tapir, among others; and an abundance of bird species such as macaws, parrots and toucans. In recent years, the Centre has worked closely with the Hydromet Services to establish an Automated Weather Station at the site and to conduct surface water-quality monitoring and assessment of the Lower Essequibo Watershed, an important area due to the many land uses taking place there, such as agriculture, logging and mining and its high value as a tourism corridor.

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By then, Government and private sector investors were paying closer attention to environmental issues and the demand for the expertise EMC offered became sought-after as our reputation for quality work and effective solutions grew locally and regionally.
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At a time when there is increasing focus on the environment and deriving solutions aimed at balancing conservation and development, the Centre is being positioned to play a key role in raising awareness and motivating the next generation of conservation enthusiasts.

But even as I was focused on conservation, there was a new opportunity to be part of the national tourism efforts when I was invited to serve as Tourism Technical Consultant to the Minister of Tourism. By that time, the potential for tourism to become a key economic sector was well recognised. While there were many activities taking place within the sector, there was a clear need for an institution to coordinate and spearhead these effort—one which would bring the Government and private sector together. The setting up of the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) through the passage of legislation and putting the organisational arrangements in place was an important step for Guyana

and I was honoured to have been part of this process. Today, the GTA continues to play a lead role in tourism development, including community-based nature tourism initiatives, and the sector is one that is being actively promoted.

In January 2005, Guyana faced devastating floods that were brought on by extreme weather events. Large areas of Guyana's coast were inundated and several regions were declared disaster areas. This single incident cost as much as 60 per cent of GDP for that year, and it was a stark reminder that climate change is real.

Then President Bharrat Jagdeo, in seeking to find solutions to combat climate change, conceptualised and led an approach to deploy Guyana's forests in the global fight against climate change and through this, to earn revenue that would support the pursuit of a low-carbon growth path. I was invited to help support this effort and was soon heading up the Office of Climate Change at the Office of the President.

As the Head of the Climate Change Office, I served as Guyana's technical focal point to Mc Kinsey and Co. and the Clinton Foundation's Climate Initiative to support the development of the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS). I held responsibility for coordinating the preparation, launch, national stakeholder awareness and engagements, implementation and subsequent revisions and updates to the draft; had direct responsibilities for managing the stakeholder processes; and was the convenor of the national steering committee responsible for overseeing the LCDS. More importantly, I was a principal member of the team that negotiated the Guyana-Norway Partnership and was responsible for coordinating its implementation.

These responsibilities allowed me to engage with stakeholders at the local, community level across Guyana and



It is a recognition of the importance of the environment and the role the private sector can play in sound environmental management

also at the regional and international level. As Guyana's point person to the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), I was responsible for ensuring Guyana's obligations to the Convention were met, including national reporting. What Guyana was doing through the LCDS and Norway Partnership was gaining global attention and increasingly, the country was being seen as a leader, punching above its weight on a key global issue.

The LCDS received national and international acclaim and was recognised by the United Nations as one of the first working models of green growth. The Guyana-Norway Partnership was the first national-scale model of REDD+ and Guyana one of the first countries to receive payments for forest climate services of close to US\$250Million under the landmark agreement. The lessons from the Guyana-Norway Partnership helped shape the REDD+ component

of the Paris Agreement. In the midst of these developments, Guyana held another Regional and General Election and soon had a new Head of State, President Donald Ramotar. I was asked to serve as Advisor to the President and continue the implementation of the LCDS.

The Low Carbon Development Strategy remains one of Guyana's single most important development strategies and has taken on renewed importance as the world seeks to accelerate efforts at tackling climate change.

Guyana's economy had recovered by the early 2000s and the Government had embarked on a series of interventions to diversify the economy and promote entrepreneurship. The Environmental Protection Act had put in place requirements for environmental authorisation of projects, both in the public and private sector, and the Agency had grown to

the stage where it was beginning to enforce the requirements.

By then, Government and private sector investors were paying closer attention to environmental issues, and the demand for the expertise EMC offered became sought-after as our reputation for quality work and effective solutions grew locally and regionally. To our credit, we were changing the way businesses and Governments approached infrastructural investments and projects and demonstrating that development does not have to be pursued at the expense of the environment, and a right balance can be achieved by applying the right tools.

My involvement with national initiatives had not gone unnoticed, and I was encouraged to take up leadership roles in the private sector. EMC had become a member of several local business support organisations and in 2017, I was elected President of the Guyana Manufacturing and Services Association (GMSA) and was also a council member of the Private Sector Commission (PSC), where I headed the Energy Sub Committee.

As President of the GMSA, I coordinated a strategic partnership between the GMSA and the Government through a series of policy roundtables and institutional collaboration, which led to initiatives and advances in areas of agro-processing, forestry and wood processing. In 2017, the GMSA spearheaded Uncapped Marketplace: an exhibition that promoted the products of local agro processors as well as provided training, access to finance and other interventions to help make their products more viable and marketable. Many of

these products can now be found on local supermarket shelves and Uncapped has become an annual event. Through the experience of working with local agro producers and processors as part of Uncapped, and recognising the efforts of women agro-processors, EMC, as part of its CSR efforts, began to support the women agro processors of the North West District by promoting their agro products.

My involvement with the private sector continues to evolve. I subsequently served two additional terms as GMSA President and currently serve as Vice President of the American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) in Guyana, where I chair the Energy Committee.

In 2020, following his election to office, President Irfaan Ali appointed a panel of Guyanese and Caribbean personalities to provide advice and guidance on Local Content Policy and Legislation. The advancing of the oil and gas sector had brought to the fore the issue of maximising local involvement and benefits in the value chain and a mechanism to facilitate this was seen as critical, especially by the local private sector. It was a big responsibility for me to serve as chair and to guide the work of the panel, the engagements with various stakeholder groups and the presentation of the findings and recommendations to the Government. Many of the recommended actions were subsequently taken up in the Government's Local Content Policy and Legislation, which was passed in the Parliament in December 2021.

Not often does one get the opportunity to make a career and a successful business out of something one enjoys doing and is passionate about. To

be able to bring that knowledge and experience to support solutions to address issues at the local, national and global level is an opportunity of a lifetime.

I have much to be thankful for. My lovely wife, Malisa, has been my constant support on this journey and my son, Shayne, though still very young, shares my curiosity about the world and love for science, animals and the environment.

I am honoured that the Anthony Sabga Committee has considered my efforts worthy of this accolade. In many ways, it is validation for the years of hard work and sacrifice that we at EMC have made. But more so, it is a recognition of the importance of the environment and the role the private sector can play in sound environmental management and helping to address global issues, such as biodiversity loss and climate change.

We must take action to address environmental challenges. While traditionally, regulation was the preferred method, the time has come to embrace action through innovation, incentives and environmental and social governance. Protecting the environment is not limited to any one country or individual, it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that we preserve it for the generations that will come.

I believe this Anthony Sagba award provides me with a platform to continue to raise the level of awareness of the environment, its many facets, actions needed and opportunities, but more so to inspire and motivate the next generation. Perhaps it is in this pursuit that there is the greatest achievement.



ANUSKHA SONAI, HOYS

Our Public & Civic Contributions Laureate, 2022

Anuskha Sonai is a digital entrepreneur whose social enterprise in Suriname promotes the involvement of women and young people in the digital economy. She often presents to audiences of attentive women and students who want to know more about ICT. Her goal is building a Caribbean tech hub that ultimately helps Suriname diversify its own economy. Since receiving her Anthony N Sabga Award, she has also been awarded Suriname's Honorary Order of the Yellow Star (Knight).

Are you saying that I'm nominated or are you saying that I have won?

This is the first thing that I was able to say when Mrs Maria Neilson from the ANSA McAL Foundation informed me over the phone that I was one of their 2022 Laureates. I was experiencing so many emotions at once when she confirmed: "I'm saying that you have won...". Nothing more than "Wow, Yes! Yes! Yes! You don't know how happy I am" is what came out of my mouth while I was experiencing a cocktail of emotions. Did I expect it? No, not really. Did I hope to win? Oh, yes! I had my fingers crossed from the moment that I knew that my nomination was official.

I was awarded the prestigious Anthony N Sagba Award, Caribbean Excellence for Public & Civic Contributions, and in doing so, I became the first laureate from outside of the English-speaking Caribbean, which is an honour I am so humbled by. I am proud to have received this award for my work serving others. The Anthony N. Sagba Foundation recognises hard-working individuals who go above and beyond for their communities and country at large, and I am thrilled to have been named alongside other recipients who have positively impacted their societies. I'm grateful for the Guyana nominating committee for noticing my work and nominating me. I appreciate and value their efforts a lot.

I am an ICT Entrepreneur born and brought up in Suriname. My mission is to develop a healthy Digital Ecosystem in the Caribbean through technological and educational innovations.

My work focuses on building the capacity of youth and women so they can become professionals and entrepreneurs in the Digital Economy. I believe that by focusing on human resource development in this digital era, we are able to create a sustainable impact that will result in the diversification of our Caribbean economy. And by focussing on women and youth, we can create a more inclusive ecosystem and address the sustainable development goals: Gender Equality, Quality Education, Decent Work and Economic Growth.

I have built my business around my purpose, so I can carry out service to the public and grow my companies at the same time. As a social entrepreneur, certified foresight practitioner and business leader, I am constantly engaging with multiple stakeholders to engage them in developing the Caribbean's Digital Economy. At Creative Tech Hub Caribbean, our purpose is to integrate social good and profitable business practice. For us, this social enterprise approach is necessary to create a strong and sustainable future for the Caribbean. That's why my business partner and I decided to evolve from a single for-profit digital marketing agency into a cluster of for-profit and

I became the first laureate from outside of the English-speaking Caribbean, which is an honour I am so humbled by.



“ I have built my business around my purpose, so I can carry out service to the public and grow my companies at the same time. ”

nonprofit entities that reinforce each other's work. At our core, we are future thinkers, who use strategic foresight to prepare ourselves and our clients for the many scenarios of change in the age of the digital economy.

Creative Tech Hub Caribbean is a cluster of companies with the mission to develop the Creative Technology Ecosystem in the Caribbean. The cluster collaboratively offers web development, mobile app development, social media services and cloud services to companies in the Caribbean, Europe and USA. The profits from these

companies are used to fund the Digital Talents Academy.

It's an Academy designed around the Learn.Work.Grow concept, where youth (13–30) are educated in Creative Tech Jobs: Animators, Game Developers, Digital Designers, Virtual Assistants and Content Creators.

The cluster works from Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad and has a customer base in the Caribbean, Europe and the USA. Companies currently part of the Creative Tech Hub are: 21Q Caribbean n.v., Digital Talents Academy, Cloud Engine n.v., Spang Makandra n.v. Cybermango, and Creative Talents Foundation.

The whole concept of Creative Tech Hub Caribbean is based on creating a win-win-win for all our stakeholders.

- Win for the **founders and employees:** living a purposeful life by making an income while serving community;
- Win for the **participants of our courses:** as they learn and grow, they also work on their employability and their ability to develop emerging markets for the benefit of the community;
- Win for the **customers of our companies:** receiving high-quality services and products in becoming part of the Digital Economy while also contributing to the development of Human Capital in the Caribbean Creative Industries;
- Win for the **Caribbean Community:** in the short term, our community benefits from the community projects by learning skills and becoming self-sustainable, and in the long term, our community benefits from the impact of digital technologies, as the cultural and creative industries are important enablers for sustainable economic growth. They generate jobs and income and contribute to individual and community well-being.

How I came up with this concept has been part of my learning journey since my childhood.

I grew up in an environment where hard work and good results were rewarded. Excellence was our operating system. Bring good grades and positive reviews from teachers and you were rewarded at home. Rewards varied from extra play time to sweets and candy, favourite food and going somewhere out of the city. These rewards meant a lot to me as we had lots of fun together as a family.



Growing up in Suriname in the eighties, I was very fortunate to have a wonderful upbringing. My parents are hard workers and they instilled those values into us, their four daughters. They've always taught us to be grateful for what we have and work hard towards a better future.

My parents believed that the only way we could get ahead was by working hard and getting good grades. Education was a priority for them, too. They wanted their children to get "an education", and we were required to

get high marks in school. They also taught us the importance of doing seva (serving others) and sharing whatever we can with those less fortunate than us and also to respect all cultures and religions.

My mother encouraged us to read a lot. Every morning, we were required to read a chapter of any book before going to school. She also taught us to speak our mind but know how to hold our tongue (which was my weakness, to be honest). My father taught us through his actions to have a high

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I grew up in an environment where hard work and good results were rewarded. Excellence was our operating system.
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President Irfaan Ali, presents Ms Anuska Sonia with her medal.

moral compass. He taught us to be charitable, honest and have kindness of heart.

I started working with my parents at a very young age, and that's when my mindset developed into that of growth. I was able to see the world through many different perspectives.

As a result of this upbringing, I've had nothing short of a strong work ethic. The goal was to become someone of value in society, someone who is

recognised for their work. I knew what values were important to me, the ones my parents so strongly instilled in me: integrity, excellence, service, purpose, courage, results, optimism. And that's what shaped my character when it came to making decisions and creating my life.

I grew up believing that living is not an ending destination but rather a continuous journey where each moment is a stepping stone towards bigger and better things... even after

People, especially co-students and co-workers, always asked "Why are you always so competitive? Why do you always need to be the best? Why isn't a low grade or low quality good for you?" And I realised that they thought that I was in a competition with them

we die. Hence we must do good deeds; good karma guided by our Dharma (philosophy of life, according to Hinduism) so we can attain eternal bliss.

When I was in University, we (the four sisters) discovered the path of spirituality. Spirituality is part of who you are as a human being in relation to the universe. It's not only about your personal beliefs, it's about how you feel about life itself and how you give back for the greater good and for love. So when we discovered the benefits of living a spiritual life, we supported the organisation by becoming volunteers and introducing our friends and other students to the courses.

This was the moment for me when doing seva (service) was even more engraved in my soul. We were growing spiritually and mentally, and we shared this 'secret' with others too, just like we were taught by our parents. Together we achieve more.

This award is even more special because it's for excellence, something that I was misunderstood for. People, especially co-students and co-workers, always asked "Why are you always so competitive? Why do you always need



to be the best? Why isn't a low grade or low quality good for you?" And I realised that they thought that I was in a competition with them. So I always made sure to explain to them that I am not in competition with them. I am just trying to continuously improve my circumstances and make my life's journey as beautiful and fulfilling as possible, as this would also benefit everyone around me.

I think that excellence is important because it helps us to improve our circumstances and create more fulfilling lives. I believe that the true measure of an individual is their desire to continuously improve themselves by learning, unlearning and relearning continuously.

In this day and age, where everyone is striving to get ahead in their careers and reach the pinnacle of success, it is easy to lose sight of the most important aspect of our lives—ourselves. Our ability to reach our goals is directly proportional to our ability to look within and understand what we truly want from life. And that's what I'm focussing on.

The driving force in my life has been this quote that I came up with during my teens: **"A successful life is a life lived in the service of others by becoming the best YOU"**. It is a combination of several knowledge pieces and quotes that I heard along the way.

Hence, I have always been interested in living my life in a way that would contribute to making the world a better place. I've been fortunate enough to have opportunities to do that, and I'm always excited for new ones. I'm flattered when people say I'm their role model or that my work has improved their lives. It's such an honour to know that my work is helping others. This motivates me to do more. So far, these are some of my accomplishments with my teams:

- Designed, launched and led the Women in Tech Scholarship; 110 women empowered and encouraged to pursue a career in tech.
- Designed a model for the development of the Digital Entrepreneurship Ecosystem

in the Caribbean with input from professionals from seven Caribbean countries, including Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados, Bahamas, Turks and Caicos.

- Designed, launched and led the NxtGen Digital Professional; 60 talents between 18-30 years trained in social media, web development, internet marketing and digital content creation.
- Designed, launched and led the Learn.Work.Grow Program; 27 young talents 18-30 years provided with training, work and experience (guided for three years) after which they started their own companies or joined larger companies.
- Next Generation Women in ICT Program, 2017.
- Market Assessment "Identifying Training Needs for ICT Skills". Implications for providing demand-driven youth training programmes.
- Teamed up with ICT professionals to design and produce the region's



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 To have been able to help young graduates become young professionals in larger companies and become founders of their own startups means a lot to me. The same goes for empowering women to become entrepreneurs, or to work in high paying jobs.
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largest ICT event: ICT Summit Paramaribo for three consecutive years: 2013, 2014, 2015.

- Coaching of young innovators to establish their Grid Gaming event in 2017.
- Cocreated the Creative Week for six consecutive years 2013-2019; a week where we bring together industry professionals, creatives and developers to find solutions for issues around us.
- In 2020, we trained 884 persons to work at the voting stations during Suriname's election amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic while the country was in full lockdown. We created an online platform and trained everyone through distance education.
- In 2021, as a support to our health sector and frontliners, we trained 179 people in data entry

during the vaccination campaign. The application was built by a party selected by PAHO and IDB in OSLO and there was no local counterpart with the technical knowledge to support the Ministry of Health with the implementation. 21Q Caribbean supported free of charge with the implementation and we trained the doctors, nurses and administrative personnel in how to use the application. We also trained and deployed data entry personnel: 60 students were trained and delivered to the Ministry. 13 were trained and deployed by us as coaches, mentors and trainers on several vaccination locations throughout the country.

- The Caribbean Girls Hack 2021 Hackathon reached the highest number of youth across the region due to the cutting-edge technical solutions and contribution made

by us, which provided a digital platform for participants from over 10 Caribbean countries, which also allows others to benefit from the Hackathon engagement of girls presenting their creative technical solutions to critical UN sustainable development goal issues faced in the region, including climate change and resilience, gender based-violence and 'save our oceans'.

- Contributed as a Technical Presenter for direct technical skills training, as part of the Skills Hub within the Hackathon.

We have also served as members of the Women in Tech Caribbean community where we continue to seek out new partnerships with coding, mentoring and leadership partners from across the world to deliver tech activities for girls and young women across the region.

If you study my programmes and initiatives carefully, you'll find that there's a challenge that I am addressing. When I first started to work in the digital economy, there were no educational institutes that trained people to become web developers and digital designers. So our company started a training programme to educate their own employees. This was a nine-month programme for 18 people. Nine of these talents were selected to work with us. Our company then helped to start the vocational ICT course at a local school, where 50 persons are admitted each year. This small scale wasn't enough to provide us with enough talents throughout the many years, as we were also growing and serving international markets. So we launched our Digital Talents Academy, where we educate youth and women to work in the digital economy.

More and more companies need tech-savvy personnel but because of the big education-to-business-gap, there aren't enough qualified personnel.



The Academy tries to minimise this gap by offering training programmes to everyone.

When I came to know that graduates weren't able to get a job as they didn't qualify, and businesses couldn't find skilled personnel, I started the Learn.Work.Grow programme to give students the opportunity to follow a three-year programme where they didn't just learn about technical skills but also 21st century skills, and they worked on real projects with big companies. After the successful completion of the course, they could either start their own business or

work in a large company, usually one that didn't want them to work there, as the graduates lacked experience before.

Having been able to help young graduates become young professionals in larger companies and become founders of their own startups means a lot to me.

The same goes for empowering women to become entrepreneurs, or to work in high paying jobs. I launched the Women in Tech Scholarship because we saw that not many women were joining the tech industry and the results are there.

Has it been easy? Now that I have overcome my hurdles and challenges, it looks like it was worth it, but in those moments, I remember feeling overwhelmed, stressed and sad. They say, what doesn't kill makes you stronger. At first, I disagreed with accepting that life has to be difficult for us to learn our lessons. I think we can learn from good experiences, too, and I would want to save everyone from having to go through bad times. But I now know that those moments

are important parts of life, as they are lessons. One of the many spiritual learnings that I strongly believe in is that in nature, contraries are complementary. We can appreciate good because we have known bad. We cannot understand the concept of 'up' without having a 'down'.

During my journey in our small company, I was offered higher-paying jobs in bigger corporations. And I am glad that I didn't let it distract me

from my purpose, although it was very tempting. What I have been able to accomplish in a smaller firm with a smaller budget is much more impactful than just contributing to certain CSR (corporate social responsibility) projects, which we usually see in large firms. I am grateful for knowing exactly what I want to achieve and keeping my focus.

As a female entrepreneur in a male-dominated industry, earning respect

I have worked long hours for years because I knew that if I did well, I would open doors for other women. It didn't matter to me that I wasn't paid for many of the roles. What mattered was that my contribution would help to develop the digital entrepreneurship ecosystem, and it would help others.



Programme Director, Mrs Maria Superville-Neilson, with laureate Ms Anuska Sonai.

has been a struggle. Because I was taking over the company from my male business partner, people mostly assume that he is the one with all the ideas and the vision to do business in a meaningful way. And I had to work extra hard to show what I got. I was more than willing to put in the work to create my own reputation for being a hardworking, honourable businessperson in my own right. To overcome this, I have had to learn to build my confidence and overcome my negative self-talk.

With the majority of the high-level business world still being dominated by men, it can be hard to blaze your own path and facilitate introductions and connections into some of the more elite business networks. This is something my business partner supported me with.

In many organisations, I started as a participant and grew from there, step by step until I became one of the partners or leaders.

This has been true for

1. Spang Makandra, which has been a wonderful platform for me to learn, work and grow and start my own companies. I grew from an employee at the company to a serial social entrepreneur. Spang Makandra is now named Creative Tech Hub Caribbean.
2. Step into Leadership Conference - A partnership to develop servant leadership in Suriname. I started as

one of the participants and in the 4th year, I was one of the trainers/facilitators.

3. CANTO - I attended in 2016 for the first time and became the Chair of the Marketing and Communications Committee in 2018.
4. ICT Association Suriname - I was one of the employees of a member company and started to work as a volunteer in several committees in 2011, and, in 2020 I became the Chair of the ICT Association.
5. Anima Caribbean Digital Media & Animation Platform - I started as a participant in 2016 and became a partner, and, since 2020, I have been the Festival Lead.

The reason I am mentioning this is to share with readers what growing looks like. We don't always start as the "leader of the pack". Becoming the leader is a journey in itself and you have to perform well in each role to be promoted until you reach your highest potential. I have worked long hours for years because I knew that if I did well, I would open doors for other women. It didn't matter to me that I wasn't paid for many of the roles. What mattered was that my contribution would help to develop the digital entrepreneurship ecosystem, and it would help others.

In all difficult situations, I ask myself, what is this teaching me? What is the lesson that I need to learn from this? When you're in the middle of a difficult situation, it can be hard to see the

positive. But by asking yourself these questions, you can begin to turn your situation into a learning opportunity.

This helps me figure out what I need to focus on, what needs to change and how to stop the same thing from happening again. I think it's important to be in tune with these lessons because they're giving you a hint of where you need to focus your energy. These are your areas of growth. The universe wants you to grow and change, and so it's sending you the same lesson until you learn it.

This approach also helps me stay calm and create space for myself so I can approach the situation with clarity and a sense of purpose. And I have a wonderful support system: my family, my friends and my business partner.

So far, every time I was given an opportunity to learn and experience something new, I did it without hesitation. Not knowing what I wanted led to knowing my life's purpose. Every time I faced a challenge, I did everything to change that challenge into an opportunity or business idea, and then executed it with all my heart and passion.

And when the time is there for me to transition to the next phase of my soul's journey, I will leave with a feeling of fulfillment and by knowing that life has been good. Life is a celebration, enjoy each moment and grow at every opportunity.



DR KIM JEBODHSINGH

Our Public & Civic Contributions Laureate, 2022

Dr Kim Jebodhsingh is an ophthalmologist and oculoplastic surgeon from Barbados who not only has a thriving private practice but does transformative pro-bono eye surgeries in the public sector. She is also a connector in the Caribbean eye health community, ensuring that regional specialists interact with their international colleagues through seminars and workshops.

2022 was a landmark year for me. It marked the one-year anniversary of my new private office, the Eye Clinic, which I personally designed and built. It will also mark 22 years since I graduated from medical school. My husband, Mark, will celebrate his 50th birthday, and we will celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary. Our twin sons, Luke and Dominic, will be 16 and will also celebrate the one-year anniversary of their cafe, the Secret Garden, as well as the fifth anniversary of their first business, School Days Lemonade. The twins were also accepted to The Kent School, the number one boys squash school in the USA. Finally, last but certainly not least, I won the Anthony N Sagba award. My journey towards this landmark year has been filled with hard work, challenges, joys, surprises, ups and downs, but the theme of my personal and professional path has always been perseverance.

I was born in Barbados to a Barbadian/Guyanese Methodist mother and a Trinidadian, Hindu father. Our lives were simple when I was child. I grew up in a household where hard work and dedication to your commitments were the norm. It was not a chore, it was not difficult, it was just the way of life. My parents worked for their family, their students and their society. My mother was a Geography teacher at Combermere school who gave freely her time, her ideas and her creativity, and she liked nothing more

than to see her students succeed. She wanted to give each student an equal opportunity regardless of their colour, class or creed. She never gave up at anything. She has grit.

My father was a university lecturer in French at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill. He was born in Trinidad and Tobago and played football for his country. He loves sports and youth development. He initiated the sports development programme at UWI and devoted years to sports at the university and in the community, with particular interest in football and volleyball. There is not a month that goes by where I don't meet someone who says, "I knew your mum or dad, they helped me with..." My dad was very smart with saving and investing for our family. My parents rarely splurged, it was always measured spending, savings were for our education. My mum knew how to make the smallest celebrations very special with her creative side, she would always spend very little but the result was fabulous, and, as children, we were no wiser. She even went to a cake decorating class at the YMCA so our birthday cakes would be nothing but spectacular.

Their example taught me many values and life skills: dedication to others and how to be the ultimate multitasker and time manager. I learnt that it doesn't matter how little you have, there is always something you can create out of it, and you don't need a lot of finances

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I also lived by the belief that there are always other people who will help you when they observe that you are genuinely working for the good of others.
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to do so. When you do have the funds, spend wisely and conservatively. I also lived by the belief that there are always other people who will help you when they observe that you are genuinely working for the good of others. It was living up to my parents' example that really motivated me. They worked hard to build a home and a life for my older sister Lisa, my younger brother Damon and me, as well as touching the lives of so many through community and education. I knew I wanted to do the same but still hadn't quite figured out how.

At school, I was a very dedicated and multitalented student. I explored art, which today continues to be one of my passions. I was awarded the top prize for Art in the Caribbean when I did my CXC's and other National Gold awards at the National Independence Festival of Creative Art (NIFCA), but was I going to be an artist or an architect? Still undecided, I went on to gain a Bachelor of Science Degree at the University of Waterloo in Canada, and while still excelling, I hadn't yet found the path that I was looking for.

Medical school at University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica was intriguing. It stimulated all your senses and many emotions. It was exciting, overwhelming and daunting all at the same time. It required perseverance and a great deal of self-confidence. The bar was set high and the expectations were great. I was surrounded by brilliant students from all around the Caribbean. My time in Jamaica not only gave me the gift of the beginnings of a career I would love, it also gave me the beginning of a marriage that would be my anchor through all the professional and personal challenges for the next 2+ decades of my life. I met my husband Mark and his family

when I was studying at medical school in Jamaica. His parents Donald and Elizabeth Wilson were both senior lecturers at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica and dedicated Catholics who are brilliant, kind and giving people and showed me how to include religion in your professional life and give your time to those in need. Their family values reflected my own, with a dedication to education and giving to one's community.

I subsequently went on to complete my General Ophthalmology training at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, USA, followed by an American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Fellowship (ASOPRS) at the University of Toronto, where I received the Gillingham Pan-American Scholarship. I chose ophthalmology because it encompasses all areas of medicine, surgery and patient care, all of which I enjoyed and had a difficult time deciding on one specialty, and I absolutely enjoy attention to detail in microsurgery.

Then I chose Oculoplastic and Reconstructive surgery because it is very artistic and many times,

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One huge bonus in this surgical field is that in most cases, the improvement in the patient’s problem is accomplished almost immediately.

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requires your imagination and creativity, and one huge bonus in this surgical field is that in most cases, the improvement in the patient’s problem is accomplished almost immediately, resulting in patient satisfaction and my gratification. If you were to ask me after years of practice, if I would have changed the field I was in, the answer would be absolutely not. I have been so blessed to have found a career that gives me such joy and satisfaction.

During this time, Mark and I got married. My husband is a very intelligent, reflective, peaceful and supportive husband and family man, who enjoys nothing more than to see his wife thrive and succeed. We had our twin sons when I was in my residency programme in Detroit, Michigan. They are now 15 and are the brightest and most multitalented entrepreneurial young people I know. They are also my toughest critics, they make me strive to try to be a better mother, wife, doctor, person.

One of the greatest challenges I faced was being pregnant with twins during my residency training programme. I had a very complicated pregnancy which required me to be on eight weeks of bedrest, and the boys were born at 30 weeks, Dominic weighing 3lbs 3oz and Luke 2lbs 13 ozs. Luke was born with a hole in his heart, which with prayer, closed on its own. I chose to go back to work after two





weeks of giving birth while they were in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for nine weeks. I spent my time at work during the day and in the NICU at night. There were many mums with twins and triplets—some of the babies passed away or had horrible complications in the NICU. I remember we had to wash our hands at a large stainless-steel sink for three minutes every time we entered the area. My hands used to bleed. I also remembered many female doctors in my residency programme who did not sympathise with me. It was a tough time, I could have lost everything I had worked for and was working towards. What got me through this was lots of prayer and family support and my ability to multitask. I became a true believer in St. Gerard, the patron saint of Motherhood. My best friend for the past 40 years, Natalie Maloney, was and is always there for me through thick and thin.

This experience taught me empathy, compassion, raw human emotion and helplessness. This made me a better doctor, as I now understood what patients go through in their

own journeys. This was the final year of my training, and I was to start my fellowship training at University of Toronto. I worked hard, very hard, and tried to get all I could out of the opportunities I had been given. I was very aware that the opportunity of being accepted into the very competitive residency programme in Ophthalmology at Henry Ford Hospital and an ASOPRS fellowship at University of Toronto was to be relished, and in my mind, I was to come back to the Caribbean the best doctor and surgeon I could be. My mentors recognised my dedication, talent and determination and I received letters of recommendation stating: “She has some of the best surgical hands I have ever seen in a resident.” I earned the respect of my mentors and one of my biggest honours was being asked by two of the supervising doctors in my Oculoplastic fellowship programme to be their surgeon while I was a fellow.

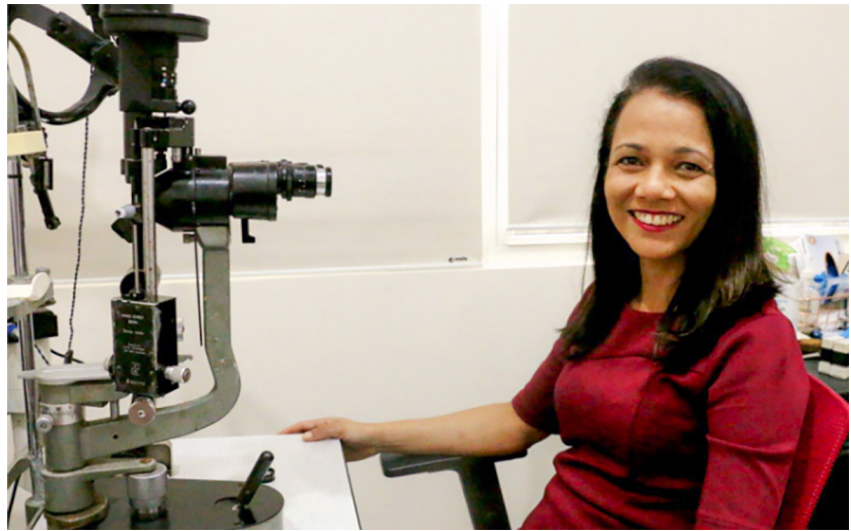
In life, I have rarely felt pride in my accomplishments, as I have the fundamental belief that we each have God-given strengths, and we are placed on earth for a purpose

My mentors recognised my dedication, talent and determination and I received letters of recommendation stating: “She has some of the best surgical hands I have ever seen in a resident.”

to contribute and make it a better place. So when I complete one task, I move on to the next. So I returned to Barbados with my family after spending 18 years overseas being educated and mentored by some of the brightest and best in the field of Ophthalmology and Oculoplastic and Reconstructive Surgery. I had made so many friends and colleagues from all around the world, and I felt so satisfied returning to Barbados, and this time, I was so pleased when I completed my fellowship, as it was part of my journey, filled with many hurdles that I overcame. I had always intended to return to Barbados after completing my training. Not only was it a patriotic obligation to do so since I had benefited so much from our outstanding and free education system, which had been my launchpad to be trained in ophthalmology in some of the top-ranked institutions worldwide, but also to emulate my parents and follow in their footsteps of giving back. I came back to Barbados "Bright eyed and bushy tailed". I wanted to serve my people and to share with the medical students, junior doctors and my colleagues the benefits I had reaped.

I became a sessional Oculoplastic consultant at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, seeing patients who had been waiting for years for the type of surgical services I could now provide. When I first came back in 2010, there was a list of children and adults who had ptosis (droopy eyelids), and I remember doing a one-hour surgery and what joy this brought patients and parents as they could see again. I saw many cases and performed surgery pro bono and gave lectures outside of my dedicated working hours and in other Caribbean islands. I thoroughly enjoyed delivering lectures to various groups, at churches, schools, clubs and other community-based organisations.

Apart from my practice and public



educational work, I wanted to do more to benefit ophthalmology in Barbados. I started the Latest Updates in Ophthalmology Subspecialty Conference, which has been successfully held in Barbados each year since 2010, an international forum which brings Caribbean and international ophthalmology specialities together. This conference started with 10 speakers and 70 attendees and has grown to 21 speakers and 150 attendees from the USA, Canada, UK and the Caribbean. The conference started as a two-day meeting and then a third day was added to facilitate teaching world-class surgical techniques to the ophthalmologists in training.

This practical day led to my spearheading the first Microsurgical Wet Laboratory in the region, used for doctors in training to practice surgical techniques on pig eyes or artificial eyes. This exposure to surgical techniques is the ideal method of teaching and improving surgical skills. This facility was used for teaching nurses and doctors from the Caribbean during the ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital teaching mission to the Caribbean. I also started a bi-monthly journal club for all the ophthalmologists in Barbados, who meet and review the most up-to-date journal articles in the specialties in ophthalmology. I also co-founded the

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I also have to
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not all eyeballs
all the time.
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Caribbean Ophthalmology Research Alliance (CORA), a charity which raises funds to provide grants for research into eye diseases that affect Caribbean citizens, including diabetes mellitus, cataracts, glaucoma and pterygiums.

My mentors, the late Professor Jeffrey Hurwitz and Dr Paul Edwards, have supported and encouraged me along the way. Without them, none of these things would have been possible. They always advised me openly and objectively on my ventures and spent

hours chatting with me, recognising what drives me and that I had a tremendous mental and physical energy level that sometimes they would gently curb or enthusiastically support. But I always felt that I had two of the best who gave me wings to fly.

In 2021, I was invited to be a member of the International Women's Forum (IWF) (Barbados Chapter). The IWF is an invitation-only women's organisation with some 7,000 members. We work on ways to help girls and women around the world.

I also have to add that I'm not all eyeballs all the time. I continue to paint and explore my artistic interests, such as interior decorating and garden design and seeing the passion my boys had in sports. I took on the role of the President of the Barbados Squash Association. Under my leadership, the association charted a path for the development of the sport throughout Barbados, including the development of the Squash School Programme, linking it to health and national development. In addition, this has provided several opportunities for young people to excel and share their talent with the world.

There are many ways to give back. I wanted my boys to see that I chose Medicine as my main means to do so, but they could choose sports, art, education, commerce, entrepreneurship... They just have to make sure that they keep the core value of community in whatever they choose for their own path.

Coming back to 2022, and I'm a mother, a wife, a squash and art enthusiast, an educator, a surgeon and a business owner. Most importantly, I am a Caribbean Ophthalmologist, who maintains an enterprising spirit and will continue to drive my exciting vision for the future advancement of Ophthalmology in Barbados and the wider Caribbean.



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President of Barbados, Dame Sandra Mason, presents Dr Jeboodhsingh with her medal.



PROF CHRISTINE CARRINGTON, CMT

Our Science & Technology Laureate, 2022

Professor Christine Carrington is a molecular virologist from Trinidad & Tobago whose laboratory team played a crucial role in the genetic sequencing of the SARS-COV2 virus during the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby helping regional governments to make policy decisions. Focused on research into viruses that affect Caribbean populations, she also teaches at the University of the West Indies. She received the Chaconia Medal Gold in 2022.

The Curious Scientist

I am not a medical doctor. I am a scientist—driven by curiosity and a sheer love of learning. I don't recall ever not being interested in what makes things work, why the natural world is the way it is and how it became this way. I study viruses. When I was first introduced to them as a child, with my vivid imagination coloured by science fiction, I visualised them as alien spaceships invading and taking over cells.

So curiosity, a thirst for knowledge and imagination propelled me through my early years, in the safety and nurturing care of a loving and supportive family, and a "village" of my parents' friends.

When the time came for me to go to university, seeing how well I had done in my A' levels, people congratulated my parents saying, "Now she can do Medicine!"

"But she does not want to do medicine," said my parents.

"Oh, but you must make her do medicine!" they said.

Thankfully, my parents did not lean on me. I was not interested. Instead, I was intrigued by biology, especially the then new field of biotechnology, introduced to me by my mother who was also my high school Biology teacher.

So, Biotechnology became what I would study at King's College, University of London. My favourite

course was Virology and the world was in the midst of the HIV pandemic—leading me very naturally to a PhD in Molecular Virology, which I pursued at the Institute of Cancer Research (also University of London), under the expert supervision of world-renowned retrovirologist Professor Robin Weiss and his then postdoctoral researcher Dr Thomas Schulz, who is now also a highly respected leader in his field.

Under their guidance, at 26, I became entitled to be called Dr Carrington and continued at the Institute of Cancer Research as a postdoctoral researcher for one and a half years. I then joined the Department of Pre-clinical Sciences at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, where I am now Professor of Molecular Genetics and Virology. My job involves research, teaching and more recently, a lot of administrative responsibilities.

I'm driven by curiosity, and my focus on basic research (advancing knowledge) rather than applied research (finding a solution to a specific problem) often drew criticism.

"Why she studyin' that? What virus evolution have to do with anything?"

"So after she finish dat three-year research, we will have no dengue in Trinidad?"

"No? Then what's the point? She need to do something that will help de country."

"But she does not want to do medicine," said my parents.

"Oh, but you must make her do medicine!" they said.

Thankfully, my parents did not lean on me.



I kept explaining that we don't always know which problems basic research will eventually solve, but without it, we won't solve any problems

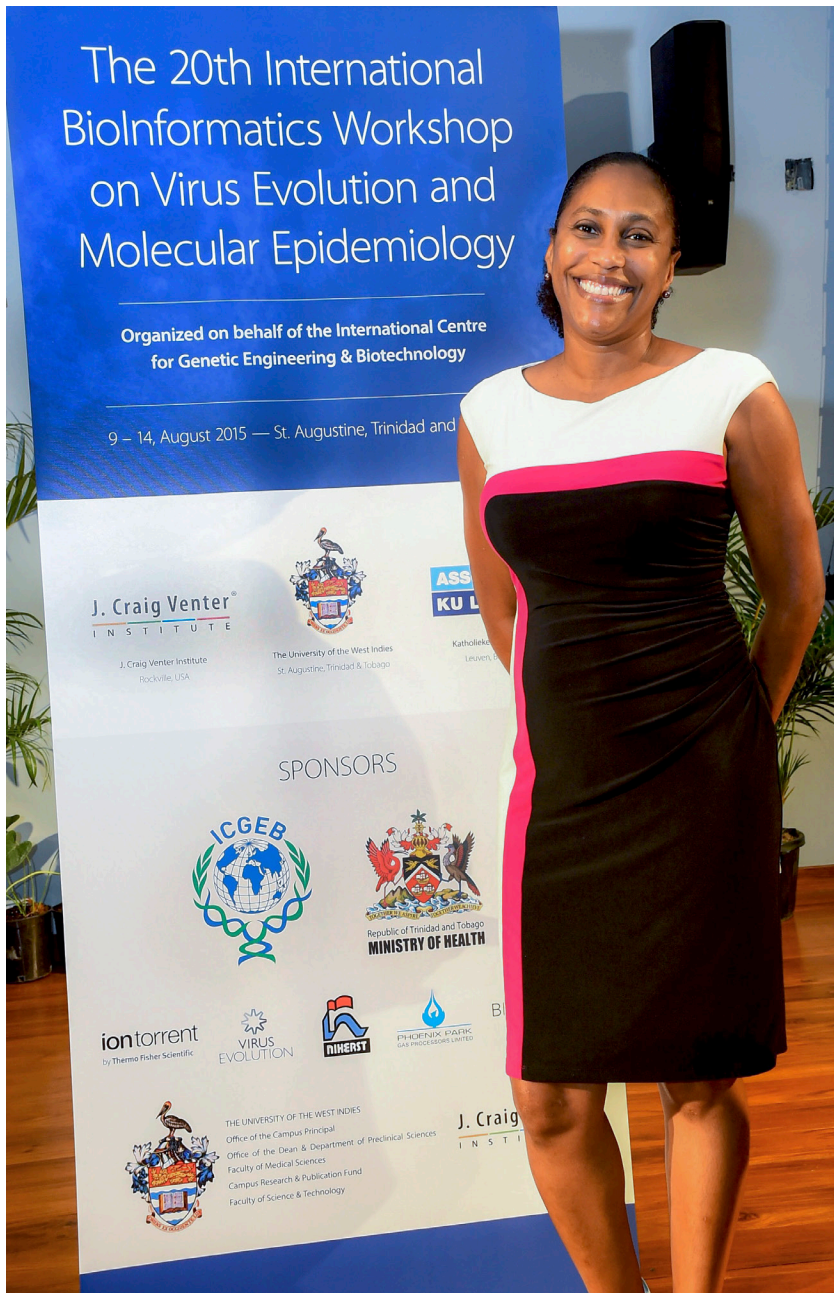
The insistence on applied research of immediate and obvious relevance came not only from laypeople, but also from people who influenced local research funding, including other academics who should know better. I kept explaining that we don't always know which problems basic research will eventually solve but, without it, we won't solve any problems—without basic research, there is no applied research. I feel somewhat vindicated that basic research in my department resulted in scientific insights and developed expertise that contributed to the global body of knowledge, gave us a voice in the international scientific community and helped to guide Trinidad and Tobago through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The emergence of viruses with pandemic potential has become progressively more frequent and likely over the past few decades. In recent memory, we have treated with epidemics of HIV-AIDS, Dengue, H1N1 influenza, Ebola, SARS, MERS, Zika, chikungunya...and now the COVID-19 pandemic with its devastating health,

social and economic impacts. So COVID-19 is not the first. And it will certainly not be the last infectious disease health emergency that the world will have to combat.

My primary research interest over the past 20 years has been understanding factors underlying the emergence of viruses and their epidemic behaviour, especially when it comes to viruses transmitted by mosquitoes and other animal vectors, such as Zika, chikungunya, Dengue, yellow fever, and rabies. In particular, I'm interested in how virus evolution (changes in viral genomes over time) and changes in our environment and in human behaviour (ecological factors) drive viral emergence from animal into human populations and their patterns of spread.

Genomes (genetic material or information) are the hereditary "blueprints" for all living organisms and viruses. The molecular blueprints of viruses can be read by extracting and then "sequencing" viral genetic material in samples taken from



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infected individuals, for example from clinical samples used for diagnostic testing.

In the viruses I study, including SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, the hereditary blueprint is written on a strand of a molecule called ribonucleic acid (RNA) instead of on DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), which serves as the blueprint in some other viruses and all living organisms. When a virus infects a cell, millions of new copies of the virus are made, each with a new copy of the viral genome. The copying process for RNA is error prone, so RNA viruses frequently undergo mutation—natural genetic change. The accumulation of these changes over time can be tracked by sequencing, recording and analysing virus genomes. The resulting data can be used to confirm a diagnosis, to track virus spread through a population, to distinguish chains of infection, and to understand how viruses cause disease and how they are likely to react to immune responses.

My research group—comprising other scientists, graduate students and laboratory technicians—has long been involved in using this approach. We sample viruses from animal and human populations, extract and sequence their genomes and use phylogenetic, computational biology and bioinformatic techniques to characterise the viruses and to estimate evolutionary relationships among them, rates of evolution, the driving forces for their evolution, where and when specific viruses or individual lineages of the virus originated, how the size of the virus population changed over time and patterns of geographic spread.

Responding to COVID-19

Up until recently, we did not have the capacity to do genome sequencing locally. When we collected samples and isolated their genomes, we depended on our overseas collaborators to get the sequencing done. They would send us the sequence data and then we would do the required analyses. But sequencing is now much cheaper



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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I knew that the capacity to do “genomic surveillance” locally was critical.
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than it used to be. Rapid “real-time” genome sequencing platforms, such as the Oxford Nanopore Technology MinION/GridION sequencing devices, have been recently developed, and there are also suites of open-source (free and publicly available) protocols and bioinformatic tools for generating and analysing genomic data. Since sequence generation and analysis can now be done in “real-time”, the results can be used to answer important health questions in a meaningful time frame—the work can produce actionable epidemiological insights to inform public health responses.

I’ve been wanting to implement nanopore sequencing technology for several years. In particular, I was interested in the MinION device—a small, cheap portable sequencer about the size of a stapler!

In December 2019, I went to a training workshop in Brazil to learn the techniques involved. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I knew that the capacity to do “genomic surveillance” locally was critical. Around May 2020, I wrote a grant proposal for a project called the COVID-19: Infectious disease Molecular epidemiology for Pathogen Control & Tracking (COVID-19 IMPACT) project and submitted it to the Trinidad and Tobago-UWI Research Development Impact (RDI) Fund for consideration for funding. At the time,

due to early implementation of very strict public health policies (e.g., border closures, quarantine and stay at home orders and other social restrictions), COVID-19 cases in T&T and other CARICOM countries were low. We had so far avoided major death tolls and in T&T, there was no community spread of the virus. However, this was all at great economic cost and countries were beginning to ease restrictions in order to restart economic activity—at the major risk of new cases appearing.

In August 2020 (by which time there was local transmission and rising cases in T&T and elsewhere in the Caribbean), we got news that the RDI would fund the project. This UWI-led project, in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Health (TT MOH), the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), and collaborators at the University of London and the University of Oxford, aimed to establish capacity for rapid SARS-CoV-2 whole genome sequencing within Trinidad and Tobago. Our purpose was to incorporate viral genomics and related molecular epidemiological approaches into the mitigation and control efforts of the TT MOH and other CARPHA member states. The specific aims were to implement MinION sequencing and a bioinformatics pipeline (i.e. a series of linked computer analyses) to generate baseline data on SARS-CoV-2 lineages circulating in the Caribbean. This would

allow us to address questions related to SARS-CoV-2 diversity, evolution and transmission within the region and to respond to requests from local and regional public health bodies for answers to questions related to COVID-19 mitigation and control.

The project (initially designed to process 800 SARS-CoV-2 samples over two years) generated its first SARS-CoV-2 whole genome sequences in December 2020. About two weeks later, the first variants of concern, B.1.1.7 (first detected in the UK and now known as the Alpha variant) and B.1.351 (Beta variant; first detected in South Africa) were reported. Thereafter, the project mushroomed. We were called upon to use our new sequencing capacity to support routine surveillance for variants of concern in the Caribbean region on behalf of the T&T MOH and other regional health ministries and institutions served by CARPHA. Seventeen countries relied on us for the generation, analysis and interpretation of genomic sequencing data on SARS-CoV-2 lineages circulating in the Caribbean.

The change in focus from research to de-facto public health laboratory meant a dramatic increase in samples submitted to the laboratory, pressure to reduce turnaround times and the need for rapid implementation of more formal sample handling and reporting procedures, with very limited human resources and infrastructure. The intensity of work also limited our ability to perform more in-depth research investigations that might have further



Chairman of the Eminent Persons Panel, Prof Compton Bourne, presents Prof Carrington with her citation. Looking on is Chairman of the ANSA McAL Foundation, Mr Andrew Sabga.

We went from one person (Dr Nikita Sahadeo) in the lab and me at the computer working day and night to six people working day and night!

enhanced the Caribbean's response. The samples kept coming and the grant money from the RDI was gone in five months instead of the planned two years! Thankfully, the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) stepped in with funding for equipment, reagents and supplies, and most importantly, additional laboratory personnel.

We went from one person (Dr Nikita Sahadeo) in the lab and me at the computer working day and night to six people working day and night! We also got support from the TT MOH and the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), who each provided us with faster high-throughput GridION sequencing devices, and CARPHA, who provided reagents and supplies.

Our laboratory has now sequenced over 4,000 clinical samples from the Caribbean and in 2021, was designated a PAHO reference sequencing laboratory as part of

the COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network. Our detection, assessment and reporting of variants helped inform decision-making for economic reopening, border controls, travel restrictions and work policies in several Caribbean countries. More recently, we have provided training and technical support to laboratories in other countries implementing their own whole genome sequencing capacity.

In terms of genomic surveillance, our work helped to propel the Caribbean out of the starting blocks, but further action and additional resources are critically needed to enhance, disseminate and sustain existing genomic surveillance capacity. The world needs to be better prepared for future infectious disease health emergencies, and not simply reactive to their arrival.

In addition to the COVID-19 IMPACT

project, I contributed to regional and international workshops, symposia and consultations, and I was heavily engaged in public education and outreach about the SARS-CoV-2 virus, variants and vaccines. I gave seminars and did Q&A sessions for various schools, public and private institutions, religious groups, neighbourhood groups and clubs. I provided technical advice to the TT MOH and regularly participated in their media briefings. This was all volunteer work and part of my public service as an academic. (I was stunned to learn that people assumed I was being paid!).

Working with the TT MOH was an eye-opener for me. The breadth of expertise they consulted when making policy decisions was impressive and reassuring, and I was proud to be part of it. Epidemiologists, medical doctors, virologists, immunologists, public health practitioners, healthcare administrators and other key



stakeholders in a room together, openly providing technical advice and expert perspectives to the Minister and Chief Medical Officer. I also recall the speed and transparency with which the Ministry reported the detection of variants of concern to the T&T public. Within less than a day or two, our lab's findings were made public. That was not the case in some other countries, especially when the first variants emerged and there was concern about the stigma attached. Some took weeks to report, and then in a less-than-direct manner.

Before all this, right at the start of the pandemic and throughout the first year, my PhD students and technicians, and those of my close colleague and fellow virologist Professor Chris Oura, were the backbone of COVID-19 diagnostics in Trinidad and Tobago. Their research training and, in particular, their previous experience with real-time PCR (used to confirm COVID-19 infection) was invaluable. They did not hesitate to use their

skills as volunteers—working very long hours (including shifts) in the Ministry's first COVID-19 diagnostic laboratory (Professor Oura's lab which, at his suggestion, the UWI temporarily handed over to the TT MOH) and helping to train Ministry of Health staff.

I'm very proud of my technicians and graduate students—not just those who were involved in the COVID-19 response but also those who went before. The best parts of my job are doing research and mentoring PhD students. I would like my legacy to be the research students I supervise, and those that they will eventually mentor. My hope is that they and our extensive networks continue to enjoy research and strive for excellence. We belong to a growing community of curious life-long learners who become teachers and exemplars with rewarding careers in research. This is the way that civilisation moves forward—on the backs of students who become teachers, and teachers who are curious and constantly learning.



If there was any discussion or question to which Daddy didn't know the answer, he would pull out an encyclopedia and read to us. Mummy would have us inspecting insects and plants...

Teachers and Learning

I come from a long line of teachers. There were public servants, doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, and communications specialists as well, but going back generations...plenty schoolteachers, including my parents.

My mother Cecile Carrington (nee Lloyd) is Jamaican. She has two younger brothers and a sister. She met my father Lawrence Carrington while they were both students at The UWI, Mona Campus. Mummy was a Biology teacher at St Augustine Girls' High School (SAGHS) and was chief examiner for CXC Biology for many years. She was an exemplary teacher and was well loved by the students. The Principal (the legendary Anna Mahase) appointed her Dean of Discipline but she didn't like the title and was more like Dean of "a safe space, a listening ear and advice for students with problems".

Daddy was born in Tobago, grew up in Belmont, with one brother and one sister. He was a UWI academic like me, a Professor of Creole Linguistics who did significant work in Education. He is an expert in Caribbean dialects, especially French creole languages. His research was on language acquisition in children, and like my mother, he was an excellent teacher. Towards the end of his UWI career, he was more involved in university administration, as a Pro-Vice Chancellor.

Both my parents were always answering our questions and encouraging us to be observant and curious. If there was any discussion or question to which Daddy didn't know the answer, he would pull out an encyclopedia and read to us. Mummy would have us inspecting insects and plants...and when I was in high school, collecting woodlice, earthworms, cockroaches and toads for her Biology class the next day (because some students

were bound to forget to bring theirs!). She enjoyed nature and looking at the stars. Daddy was more likely to have us spotting passing satellites in the night sky or taking us to the airport to watch planes take off! We were always figuring out something. Books were always available for reference or a curious question. We were never forced to "beat books" for school! They were there naturally to satisfy curiosity growing up. My parents encouraged good study habits—come home, do your homework, revise if you had a test—but then, just as important, go out and play with friends or relax. There were no cramming sessions or all-nighters.

In one form or another, my sisters and I all took up the family profession before we realised that teaching had been in the family for generations. My older sister Elsa Carrington-Clarke is a graduate of the Edna Manley School of Visual and Performing

Arts in Jamaica and has a Masters in Art Education from Ohio State University. She is a practising artist and currently teaches Art at Bishop Anstey High School & Trinity College East. Before that, she taught at UWI. Elsa has such a reputation as an Art teacher that parents with children who want to be artists move their students to her school. My younger sister Helen Carrington-Gibert is a certified Leadership and Team Coach with a background in Organisational Development. She did her Master's of Science in Management at Purdue University as a Fulbright Scholar, following her B.Sc. at the UWI. She is also trained in experiential learning methodologies—so another kind of teacher.

Elsa was born in Jamaica; Helen and I were born in Trinidad. We first lived in a UWI property on Wilson Street in St. Augustine. There were four houses off a common driveway. Friends and family used to jokingly call it the “kibbutz” as there were always lots of children (some who lived there, others dropped off), drifting from house to house, being raised by everyone. When I was about five years old, we moved to Orange Grove, on a street off Savannah Drive. It was a young neighbourhood at the time, so lots of other children, playing in the street and liming. We had a whole neighbourhood gang, and we were never bored.

Preschool was Mummy; then we went to St Joseph Girls' RC School—which my mother chose because she liked that there was a lot of space for children to run and they had pretty bougainvilleas all along the front of the school. It turned out to be a great choice when it came to the teachers too! I remember Mrs Rondon, Mrs Maxwell, “Infants” class taught by two sisters... whose students affectionately (probably unbeknownst to them) named fat Ms Carvalho and thin Ms Carvalho—both of whom were amply proportioned women. And then in Standard 5, there was the amazing and stylish Mrs Alleyne, who steadfastly taught everything from first principles. While other teachers



were encouraging cramming, constant practice tests and, as she put it, always “blocking out, blocking out” (i.e., doing multiple-choice tests), Mrs Alleyne would be ensuring that we could parse sentences and that we knew how to pronounce “envelop” versus “envelope.” I passed common entrance for my first choice, SAGHS.

My childhood and teenage years were really very happy. Most of my best friends today are from those years. My sisters and I were generally so carefree that the more cynical youths in our neighbourhood felt we were naïve and weren't living in the real world...they said we were like Little House on the Prairie and referred to our parents as Charles and Caroline. I think my parents took it as a compliment!

We had a small television when I was in primary school. Mummy was not a fan. She had read some book called “The Plug-In Drug” about how children get hooked on TV. So, on school days, we were allowed to watch the news, one sitcom and “any documentary of your choice”. David Attenborough's shows

were favourites. When the TV stopped working (around the time I entered high school), there was no television in the house until I was about 16. So, we made up games, played outside and read a lot. I read Alex Haley's “Roots” at 10! I read all different genres and the usual classics, but I particularly enjoyed fantasy and science fiction (J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Jules Verne, Ray Bradbury, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley), humorous accounts of life with animals by authors like James Herriot and Gerald Durrell, and I loved David Attenborough's “Life on Earth”. I wanted to be a biologist and natural historian like him. When I was in first form, I used to read Mummy's sixth-form Biology textbooks for fun.

From forms 4 to 6, Mummy was my Biology teacher. I used to routinely come first or second in Biology. Contrary to what some people believed, she never ever shared any test papers with me! In fact, my performance was embarrassing for her. She would go through my test papers again and again looking for



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marks to deduct, making sure she had been fair. Then she would look at the papers of the girls who were just behind me to see whether she could give them more marks! She was scrupulous and objective; and that I was near the top in her class was a huge challenge to her.

Obviously, when I sat the CXC exams and then later Cambridge A' level exams, it was imperative that I got top grades in Biology. At A' levels, in addition to Biology, I did Chemistry, Maths and General Paper. Our family friend (Jennifer Beckles), who lived around the corner from us in Orange Grove, also taught at SAGHS and was my Chemistry teacher. Auntie Jennifer made it clear that she too was expecting an A! In the case of Maths, I wasn't that keen. I was doing OK but not really excelling...until Lower 6, when I had a boyfriend who was a maths whiz. He coached me and made me promise to get an A for him...what choice did I have? I got four A's and won a national scholarship.

I took a year out, worked as a library assistant at UWI for three months, then for six months as a quality assurance technician in the laboratory of the Johnson and Johnson factory... and then limed and partied for three months before going off to University in London. I chose the UK over the US because it would be easy to travel to other countries in Europe, and because I liked the look of the photo albums of friends who were already studying there. Their photos were filled with people of all different races and nationalities, while those who were in US universities seemed to have very homogenous friend groups. When I asked about it, one said to me, "girl, that's the way it is there; if you are black, you lime with black people". I wasn't keen to live with that type of segregation.

Being in London did reveal some of my own unconscious prejudices and conditioning. For example, I remember being startled when I saw white people doing road repairs, working with shovels and pickaxes.

And it surprised me that I was startled: hadn't I seen enough of that on TV? Why wouldn't they be repairing roads in their own country? On the other extreme, initially, if I saw a white man in a suit, regardless of their behaviour or demeanour, I assumed that they were in a position of authority or maybe a business person. I'd be in the underground station wondering, "Why was that businessman operating the lift?"

All in all, I lived in the UK for eight and a half years: three years for my BSc at King's College, four years for my PhD with the virology team at the Institute of Cancer Research and then the rest of the time, as a postdoctoral researcher in the same lab. Professor Weiss' team at the Institute of Cancer Research worked on HIV and other retroviruses, with a focus on elucidating the mechanisms by which these viruses enter cells, which can then inform the development of vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics. My research was on a retrovirus called Human T lymphotropic Virus Type 1 (HTLV1), which, at the time, was called Human T cell Leukemia Type 1. In addition to causing Adult T-cell leukaemia, it can cause Tropical Spastic Paraparesis, which is a condition characterised by muscle weakness, spasms, sensory disturbance and especially weakness of the legs. HTLV1 infection is not uncommon in the Caribbean. Fortunately, not every infection results in disease.

Life in London

I thoroughly enjoyed being a student in London, and I would love for my children to have even half as much of the fun and experiences that I did! Some very good friends from high school and others whom I knew before university were there with me, and I made a host of new friends from all over the world, many with whom I still maintain contact. I did earn a reputation for being "a bit of a girly swot" since I diligently went to all my classes, took great notes (my lecture notes were in high demand), handed in assignments on time and



I was consistent from the outset—a little bit of work every day and then time to spend with friends. There were no all-night caffeine-fuelled studying sessions.

consistently got high grades. But I think maintaining balance is one of my strengths. I was consistent from the outset—a little bit of work every day and then time to spend with friends. There were no all-night caffeine-fuelled studying sessions. I still fit in plenty of parties, picnics, pub crawls, drinking games, museums, art galleries and concerts, and I travelled all over Europe, including hitchhiking through Italy with my boyfriend Axel Kravatzky,

who is now my husband.

I met Axel in 1989 at the start of my final year as an undergraduate student. He is from a German minority in Transylvania, Romania...a Transylvanian Saxon (and yes, I have heard all the Dracula jokes!). His family left Romania in 1980 and migrated to Germany. When we met, Axel was studying Economics and Philosophy at the London School of Economics, and I was at King's College, but we lived in the



same Intercollegiate Hall of Residence, International Hall. Again, presumably because of the environment I grew up in, I was largely oblivious to the attentions of white guys. I had nothing against them, I found some of them attractive, but while I had no difficulty reading the intentions of West Indian men, it literally never occurred to me that a white guy might have any interest towards me. It's not something I thought or cared about, it was just not part of my consciousness. I look back now and realise that many a suitor remained firmly in the friend zone because I was so clueless.

Axel was different! After months of smiling at me across the dining hall and when we crossed paths in the corridors (and me assuming he was

smiling at someone else—having forgotten that I had once been introduced to him), he made his move. Maybe it was his German directness, but his interest was obvious, even to me. After our first date (a trip to a student party in Oxford), I was smitten. We have been together ever since and married in 1994. Axel is the most wonderful, kind, supportive, and caring husband. I would not be where I am today without him.

Return to Trinidad

In 1996, Axel and I came back to Trinidad. As the recipient of a national scholarship, I was required to work within Trinidad and Tobago for at least three years. Many scholarship winners try to escape that commitment, but

I wanted to come back. I felt it was the right thing to do. Taxpayers had funded my studies and it was right that the country should get some return on its investment in me. Also, I had left Trinidad at age 19, and I felt it was important to experience the country as an adult. I joined UWI as a lecturer. Axel had completed his MSc and was finishing up his PhD thesis; he lectured at UWI and then started his own company providing outdoor experiential learning. Luckily, he got consulting jobs that gave him the opportunity to leave the island often enough to avoid becoming stir crazy. The plan was that when the three years were up, we would discuss and decide whether to stay or to leave Trinidad to settle elsewhere, but the conversation just never came up!

I have never consciously planned or plotted how I wanted my life to be. I reach forks in the road and choose a path. So far, my choices, however instinctive or spontaneous, have served me well. Along with pursuing my PhD with Robin Weiss and Thomas Schulz, when it comes to career choices, one of the best decisions I ever made was to apply for the Commonwealth Fellowship that allowed me to spend six months with Edward Holmes research group in the Department of Zoology at the University of Oxford. Professor Holmes (who is now in Australia at the University of Sydney) is an evolutionary biologist and virologist, and one of the world's foremost experts on virus evolution. On top of that, he is an honest, decent person, excellent company and an inspirational teacher. It is under Eddie's expert mentorship that I learnt about virus genomics, evolution and phylogenetics and was introduced to a group of top-class scientists focused on emerging viruses and virus evolution—people who are now front and centre in the battle against COVID-19. I consider myself very lucky to have worked with them. I still collaborate with some of them and others in the network to which they introduced me. Collaborations between scientists in highly developed and those in less well-resourced

countries are too often lopsided and even exploitative, so I cherish the mutually beneficial, open and respectful collaborations, friendships and rapport that I have with scientists within the network to which Eddie introduced me.

Besides Axel, my parents, sisters and extended family, I have a host of friends, mentors, cheerleaders and motivators who keep me going and firmly grounded—my oldest friends Aneela Narinesingh-Dindial, Reisha Rafeek-Naidu, Lisa James-Manswell, Samantha Tross, my former Head of Department Professor Jonas Addae, my graduate students and other research team members and collaborators, and many, many more. It hasn't all been plain sailing! I've had to deal with sexism and racism, but I try not to see everything through those lenses. I call it out when necessary, deal with it and move on.

Two Beautiful Children

Axel and I have two beautiful children. It was 11 years of marriage before we became parents. Very frustrating, but well worth the wait! We couldn't ask for more. Our children are both kind, intelligent, talented and caring people, each with a well-developed sense of justice and fairness.

Lukas is now 17. He's a thinker—very rational and systematic. He takes his time to make decisions. He reflects on the world and has long-term goals. He is unusually self-aware for his age, has an excellent sense of humour, loves adventures and is a loyal friend. He likes to profess his independence and reminds us often that he is almost an adult. Family is very important to him and though he won't admit it, it's obvious that he values our opinions... even though we are old and know nothing.

Mia is 13. She is one of the most generous, compassionate and empathetic persons I have ever met. If someone is being excluded, Mia will try to bring them into the group. In primary school, she was the headteacher's go-to person when a new student



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joined, or if there was a student who needed a friend. Mia would be asked to look out for them. She is more likely to rely on intuition and emotion in her decision-making, she has a vivid imagination, enjoys making art and is full of affection.

I may be biased but they are both gems!

Family and Friends Forever

I am not one to reflect deeply on the meaning of life. I am not religious, and I have no consciously developed personal philosophy. I think the most

important thing is to respect others not because they have earned it, but because by default, everyone deserves respect...until they do something to lose it. I value relationships, integrity and transparency.

Outside of science and academia, most of my time is spent with family and friends. That's my hobby—being around people I like! Being around them, with good food and drink, in a beautiful setting or in a foreign country is even better.

I am a cheap date. I don't desire fancy



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I would encourage them all to be curious and to imagine the best, do what is right and aim to maintain the highest standards, even when the environment and those around them don't expect or demand it.

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material things. Nice if you get them but I don't expect or pursue them. The love note on a KC dinner mint wrapper, a nice ripe hand-picked mango, kind words and gestures, or simply fun times together is enough for me.

If I have only this moment, or a year or two left, I would spend it with my friends and family. I would want to ensure that my husband and our two children are secure, happy and prepared for life without me. I would want my graduate students to have a clear path to their future careers and my friends to continue to laugh and to remember me fondly. It would be all about the people. I would encourage them all to be curious and to imagine the best, do what is right and aim to maintain the highest standards, even when the environment and those around them don't expect or demand it.



President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Paula-Mae Weekes, ORTT, and ANSA McAl Foundation Chairman, Mr Andrew Sabga, congratulate Prof Carrington.



OUR 2023 LAUREATES



VICE

ABGA



JOANNE C. HILLHOUSE

Our Art & Letters Laureate, 2023

Joanne C. Hillhouse is a writer and “gal from Antigua” who, in addition to writing a range of literature from children’s books to adult contemporary novels, nurtures Antigua’s literary culture through her writing non-profit. Through workshops and competitions, she has encouraged others within her space to express themselves through language.

I ask my dad for a story.

He remembers how, after we left Holy Family School—one of two Catholic primary schools in Antigua at the time; the one, broadly speaking, for lower-income households—and went to Christ the King High School, the Catholic secondary for girls, paying fees was a point of tension.

My mother, a Convent Primary (Catholic) student who never got to complete school because her father stopped paying for her education (a defining fact of her life), put her foot down about us going to government/public school.

So we stayed in private school. And my dad would take time off from the hotel where he worked to go up the hill and talk to the Sister who was the principal: to beg for more time to pay. He would then borrow the money, against a future paycheck, even as the school fees kept rising.

But the fees were only part of it. Dad remembers that his holiday money would be put towards books, and then there were the prescribed shoes, socks, uniform, crest, new bag.

The strain of the memory of having to replace the cheap shoes in a matter of months is in his voice. Even as I recall our older brother having to wear his grandfather’s shoes. A reminder that, even in our working-class family, there were levels of privilege.

My brother was my mother’s first child to a man whom I—as well as my brother, for that matter—had only heard about; and maybe that bit was transferred to Vere in my first book, *The Boy from Willow Bend*.

As my father struggled to pay our school fees, he remembers our mother paying for maths lessons for my sister, who now has her own business.

My mother, who had periods of unemployment (and whom I remember picking up sewing work and sewing our clothes for much of my childhood) was, by then, I think, also working a hotel job. Both parents worked in Housekeeping.

She would also, somehow, put my brother through private Catholic school, as well, and send him to learn a trade. He is still the most resourceful person I know.

My sister and I had crochet lessons—and my sister, for a time, enjoyed a cottage industry making crocheted dolls. There was, for both of us, choir, and, for me, guitar lessons, primarily free (plus the free guitar I still have) with the guitarists on the choir. There were also summer and Christmas and weekend jobs to make our own “allowances”.

My parents never had money for enough, much less extras. This was but one tension in a household of unpacked trauma, and in the end, we wouldn’t make it as a family unit. And yet, my mother would send me for



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So we stayed in private school. And my dad would take time off from the hotel where he worked to go up the hill and talk to the Sister who was the principal: to beg for more time to pay.

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typing lessons and buy my first two typewriters—one manual and, years later, one electric.

I would get shortchanged on some things and pick up my own trauma and grievances. But not when it came to education; not if my parents could scratch out a way.

Both older siblings had had to go straight to work after school. However, after a few years of working, my brother would get a scholarship to study hotel work.

But I was the last child, and when I graduated Christ the King, I got to attend the State College. After college and landing a job, a Scotiabank scholarship would also take me to

university, UWI Mona (Jamaica), for a degree in mass communications and work in media. Eventually, I became what I always was: a writer.

There is a 2013 academic paper by Vigimaris Nadal-Ramos, a University of Puerto Rico student, that muses: “Do your birthplace and condition predetermine what you become in life? Education as a factor in social mobility in *The Boy from Willow Bend* by Joanne C. Hillhouse”. The title resonated, because, for my parents, education was a ladder.

My earliest memories are of Tanty (my grandmother) picking up my sister and me from Ms Swanston pre-school. I don’t know what I learnt there, but my mother recalls that the teachers told

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Eventually,
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her maybe I wasn’t ready because I didn’t speak. Mom told the teacher I related everything that happened at school when I got home. So I don’t remember; but, clearly, I stayed.

My sister and I were a year apart, depending on the time of year: She was born in September ’71 and I was born in January ’73; so keeping us together was probably just practical. My mother moved me over to Holy Family School when my sister went—she to first grade, me to kindergarten. I was a year younger than most in my year because of that move.

By the time we got there, my brother would have moved on to secondary school. It was like that, me shadowing my sister, until Grade Six, when she went up the road to secondary school.

There were no writers in my family that I knew of, no home library, just textbooks bought second hand or handed down from my sister. The books and magazines were brought by my parents from the hotels where they worked; books and magazines tourists left behind.

I also didn’t know any writers in real life. I didn’t yet think of the calypsos I loved as connected to a pen, although their lyrics were my introduction to poetry. It would be years (my late teens) before I even heard the name Jamaica Kincaid.

And with the public-library building destroyed by the quake of ’74, there were just a couple of rooms smashed together with books above a store that sold fabrics on Market Street. But I made use of it and even worked one of my summer jobs there.

My book diet—whether Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories; Trixie Belden mysteries; Judy Blume; the Wakefield Twins; Jane Eyre; Louisa Mae Alcott’s Little Women; the bag of Mills & Boon romances I found in my mother’s room when we still lived at my grandparents’ house in Ottos; or the books passed around at school—was whatever was available; whatever I could get my hands on.

The earliest Caribbean example of this was probably a sibling’s school copy of Miguel Street lying around my grandparents’ house. Likely my brother’s.

Most of my exposure to Caribbean literature would have been oral—Paul Keens Douglas riffing about Tanty and



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Slim at the Oval on the radio; jumbie stories—one of my teachers, Ms Jno-Baptiste, loved telling these; Anansi stories; calypso. Of the latter, I think, especially, of Short Shirt and his writer Shelly Tobitt, an important combo in the canon of local calypso that shaped the Antiguan in me and in my pen.

One of my favourite memories is of sitting—decades removed from childhood—in a crowded Antigua Recreation Ground, my mother and I, companionably (an anomaly) side by side on the green plastic seats of the Andy Roberts Stand. We and the crowd, a choir of hundreds, lifting up the Short Shirt classic, “Lament, oh my soul”.



It was a moment I would steal years later—because writing is stealing life, as I once wrote in a poem—for a flash fiction story, “When we danced”, which would win the Caribbean Writer flash fiction prize in 2015.

If there is a warm blanket feeling that night of unselfconscious—no doubt off-key—singing wrapped in us; in everything that made me; the blues and hope of my people: the people without privilege, the people calypso always sang for and to...that was such a moment. It informs my writing deeply.

I call myself a #gyalfromOttosAntigua and it is how I think of myself for a number of reasons—including that, without thought, my feet find their way

in this community because it is home. But, of course, it’s more complicated than that.

My mother is Dominican. She came to Antigua as a girl and was raised by a stern and musical police officer father and a stepmother, Tanty, venerated as an angel among me and my siblings. The scene where Vere breaks down crying into the soft belly of someone he doesn’t really remember knowing is ripped from my memory of Tanty’s death—a pivotal moment in my life and writing journey.

When she died, there were the silver bracelets she wore, now mine, and the black-and-white notebook with her name on it and writing that I believed,

at the time, was hers, and blank pages. Those blank pages were filled with my earliest journaling and story writing. When I say writing is how I process life, it starts there, with my first heartbreak.

Because, at some point, the reader and imaginer made in Ottos, Antigua, discovered she was also a writer.

The Sabga prize-giving ceremony in June 2023 comes a month ahead of the launch of my latest work, *To Be a Cheetah*, a children’s picture book with Antigua and Barbuda artist Zavian Archibald—my eighth overall and fourth picture book.

I’m just getting used to saying that for a number of reasons. One, how did a self-described #gyalfromOttosAntigua get to eight books—nine if you count my self-published poetry book, *On Becoming?* How did this happen? And children’s books—which were never on the cards, especially early in my career when I chafed at the limitation labels put on me?

I’d written and published a romance/family drama novella (*Dancing Nude in the Moonlight*); an adult contemporary novel (*Oh Gad!*); a coming-of-age novella (*The Boy from Willow Bend*); and a teen/young adult novel (*Musical Youth*) before I ever ventured into children’s book writing.

And, eight books in, I don’t feel like a “veteran”, I still get more rejections than not. *To Be a Cheetah* received many nice rejections—“beautifully written ... lyrical ... great promise ... in the esteemed company of a book like [the Margaret Wise Brown classic] *The Runaway Bunny*... fun and whimsical”—before Sunbird said yes.

In #thewritinglife, a shooting star is a rare thing. For the rest of us, it’s the grind: after every hill another valley, and after that another hill; and sometimes, we even fly. I’m getting to where I don’t dread the fall because I have picked myself up so many times and dared to climb and even take flight again despite the ingrained instincts to be practical and useful—sometimes



it's hard for a writer to feel in an environment that often appears not to value writers or the arts.

The calypso that has probably been my internal theme these years of trying to be an independent writer has probably been Short Shirt's Nobody Go Run Me.

It begins: "Night and day ah ketchin' hell/people think ah doing well/jus' because ah sing ah few calypso." And it defiantly insists, "Tell dem, tell dem for me: No dice/I ain' gonna eat lice/I ain' gonna grow ole/singing in the cold/not me."

Because—though I have travelled for many opportunities, and remain open to travelling more for purpose and adventure—I have planted my flag where my navel string is buried. That, too, is something that calypso gave me—shaping an identity that is specific and making of me a writer who found in us specific stories worth telling.

By the time I wrote *To Be a Cheetah*, I had made a kind of peace with the fact that, while I might not be a children's book writer, I was a writer who sometimes wrote children's books. I had developed a deep respect for the genre, its complexity, its vitality, its fun.

It made sense that it would have entered my repertoire during the childhood of the little people, now mostly grown, in my life.

Two nephews were amalgamated into the young boy in *The Jungle Outside*—the one who shadowed his grandmother (who was based on my own mother and her love of, and gift for, gardening), as well as myself and my many years of being the street hand-tennis champion all the kids in



the family wished to beat. Years after I took him ziplining, the other nephew confessed to me his fear of heights.

I wrote my first picture book, *Lost!* (initially published as *Fish Outta Water*) so that I could have something to read to children. After *The Boy from Willow Bend* had been published, I would accept invitations to present at schools. But it's not really a story for little children, and I would often find myself reading *Anansi* instead.

I would also write things to read to them. *Coral and Dolphin*, the jellyfish and Arctic seal in *Lost!* are among them. I remember reading it to children at one school and then, again, to those at the Cushion Club, a reading group to which I gave my Saturday mornings for a number of years.

It was inspired by real life—an Arctic seal had once been rescued in the waters off Antigua—but steeped in fantasy, and I was enjoying playing with that. I didn't know it was a book, had never considered actually writing a children's picture book, but I am always scouting for opportunities.

So when I saw a call for children's picture books, I dug around to see if I had, or could create, anything,



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 In #thewritinglife, a shooting star is a rare thing. For the rest of us, it's the grind: after every hill another valley, and after that another hill; and sometimes we even fly.

”
 and ended up submitting *Fish/Lost!* I always lead with character, and so Dolphin and Coral, seal and jellyfish though they were, were also children in my mind. And for that, I had only to draw from the children around me and my own inner child.

Like the day-dreamy part of *Dolphin*, the arctic seal, the curious misfit: That's all me, the girl who parlayed a love of reading and a penchant for daydreaming into a career in storytelling.

The real seal this story was inspired by was called Wadadli. Wadadli [Pen] is also the name of the project, now non-profit, I launched in 2004 to nurture and showcase the literary arts in Antigua and Barbuda.

It is easily one of the most common names in Antigua for things we want to mark as specifically Antiguan. Our indigenous name, the one we know of, is Ouladli-cum-Waladli-cum-Wadadli. It is unique to us and, at the same time, not exotic among us. It is so named to remind participants to imagine us, first; to tell our stories.

I started Wadadli Pen between my own creative writing and the writing and related things—teaching, editing, writing, coaching, etc.—I did not pay the bills. Because, when I was a writer-becoming, programmes to encourage my writing were few and far between.

The Christmas-carol competition offered by Radio Paradise; an Independence essay competition that won me a trip to Barbados; a tourism

essay competition; a playwriting prize with the Rick James Theatre while I was a student at the Antigua State College...

I was writing everything—poetry, fiction, articles, even a few plays that were performed by the drama students at the college [I must acknowledge here Mr Holder, the literature teacher and drama coordinator, recently deceased in his native Guyana, who read and encouraged not only my writing but my voice]. I continued playwriting at UWI, competing there as well. But I found a particular love for fiction writing—and, especially in Carolyn Cooper's classes, a discovery of many Black writers (Tsitsi Dangarembga to Erna Brodber to Zora Neale Hurston).

I was mentored by renowned Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris during my UWI years, and he recommended me for my first international writing workshop, facilitated by Olive Senior at the Caribbean Fiction Writers Summer Institute at the University of Miami.

This was summer 1995, after I finished



my course work at UWI Mona, and it delayed my return to Antigua. It was also the summer I began what would become my first book, *The Boy from Willow Bend*.

The UWI and U of M chapters were pivotal in my resolve to figure out how to be a writer, even though I was bonded to return to State media for which I'd worked between my college and university years.

I'm being published in another book due out in 2023. The abridged German translation of the global anthology *New Daughters of Africa* will include 30 writers from among the 200 in the full anthology, including me, or, more specifically, "Evening Ritual".

The collection already took me, in 2019, to the United Arab Emirates for the Sharjah International Book Fair, where, among other activities, I presented an Anansi story to hundreds of children at a school in Dubai—a quintessential #gyalfromOttosAntigua "how did I get here?" moment.

The story "Evening Ritual" began life in the upstairs gallery of our national museum, at a presentation on the restoration of some of the trains that ran the rails from the plantations to the Antigua Sugar Factory. There was a picture of two female cane packers that took me out of that space and into the imaginarium.

The story I wrote was disjointed—the editor of a journal I submitted to said as much. So I found myself re-working the story of these two cane packers and the arc in "Evening Ritual" into two separate stories.

I remain curious about the past, but I am mindful of centering the people whose lives are on the periphery of written-down narratives. So this modern arc engages with the history and the erasure of women like the cane packers.

Margaret Busby said, in the intro to the *Neue Töchter Afrikas*, that "Evening Ritual" "is uplifting in the course of making us think about how the past is

memorialised."

Speaking of the past, I recently came across a journal entry from March 19, 2001: "Sat was sold out + then some. What chaos! Saw the preview for my book in the Macmillan Caribbean catalogue today. Eeeeeeeee! Floating!"

Context? In the early 2000s, I had left print media and was working as the first environmental educator at the National Solid Waste Management Authority. I did a lot of good things there, but it wasn't a good environment for me, and I would be freelancing before the end of 2002.

My off-book activities included my work on Antigua and Barbuda's first and second feature-length films—associate producer in the case of *The Sweetest Mango* and production manager on *No Seed* [both films, by the way, written by D. Gisele Isaac, a friend and many other things but, relevant to this, my editor at the *Antigua Sun*, where I worked in the late 90s and had my first newspaper column, first editor



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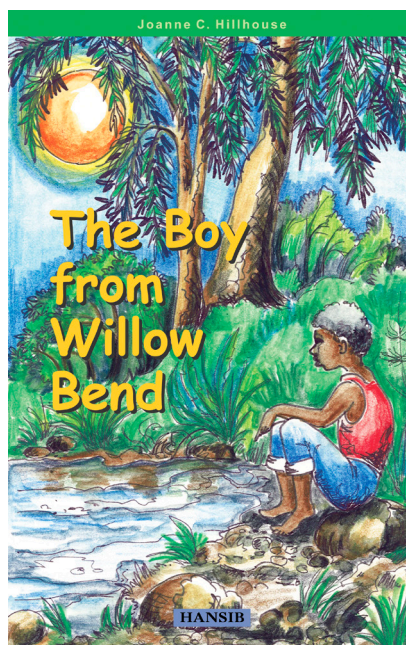
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of my first two books—The Boy from Willow Bend and Dancing Nude in the Moonlight, and editor of this essay]. I'm assuming that the journal entry refers to the first of these, Mango, given how pure my feelings are. As for the book in question, that would have been my first book Willow Bend, published with Macmillan Caribbean initially.

The books didn't do terribly well commercially and were pulped eventually. I had to start all over again—more of a rebuild, which can be harder than the first climb. In that moment, though, the first climb was behind me; the wounds of the struggle were maybe even beginning to scab over, and I couldn't yet see the fall.

At this point, I may even have been fantasising about the publisher sending me on book tours, submitting me for prizes, critical reception, the public's embrace; none of that happened as I imagined.

There was one prize submission that I am aware of, and I saw no reviews beyond the local press. There was one in a St. Lucia magazine, by an Antiguan reviewer, and a very positive review in the Trinidad Guardian, by Debbie Jacob, that I stumbled upon some time later. But the Antiguans and Barbudans who read it told me that it



made them laugh or cry in recognition of self, and that meant a lot to me.

... I find myself noticing smell a lot lately. Writing the Caribbean without smell would perhaps be like AI art: accurate but not true. What I try to capture is what's true.

That was true, too, of Musical Youth though, unlike other books where I focus on story first, it was deliberately written with the teen/YA market in mind: my first time approaching fiction writing

in this way. It was also my first time writing a book in weeks—just under two weeks to be exact—having decided only at the 11th hour to go for it.

I didn't have anything in hand when I heard about the prize, and the window felt too tight to write something new. But then, out of the blue, these kids showed up, and it was all I could do to keep up.

In retrospect, I realise the roots of this book were in an earlier abandoned story called “The Guitar Lessons” and that the seed was my own teen years, my guitar lessons, my company of friends, my creative awakening, my coming into being. Maybe that's why I was able to write Musical Youth as quickly as I did. The story had long been there, forgotten scribbles, just waiting to be told.

I finished, never feeling like I was running out of gas until it came time to submit it. My sister, Sophia, encouraged me, but the man I contacted about binding it could not do it. However, he pointed me in the direction of a local stationery store and also encouraged me to go for it.

Printing, binding and couriering it, as required, wasn't cheap, but it was a bet-on-yourself moment. And I'm glad

I did, since *Musical Youth* was first runner-up for the Burt Award for teen/YA literature.

It is on the schools' reading list in Antigua and Barbuda, has received a starred review from Kirkus, and was named one of its top indies of 2019 after a second edition was issued by my chosen publisher: Caribbean Reads, out of the 'small islands' of the Eastern Caribbean. This was one of the few times I got to choose, rather than submitting and asking to be chosen.

My books, my volunteer work (especially, with several other volunteers over the years, Wadadli Pen, now the non-profit Wadadli Pen Inc, and Cushion Club), and other projects I have initiated—from the Jhohadli Writing Project to CREATIVE SPACE to me and my friends Helena and Cheri taking the mango-tree faerie from page to the Carnival stage—are all reflections of how writing and community intersect for me.

I think it's important for us to see ourselves in the art we produce, at all ages, and to be reminded that our stories matter; that we matter.

In a live broadcast in 2021, on my Antiguan Writer YouTube channel, I speak with Trinidad and Tobago writer-artist and illustrator of two of my books Danielle Boodoo-Fortune about wanting the grandmother character in *Jungle* to be darker and funkier, after I had seen her original character studies. You see, I wanted her to be unambiguously Black and the kind of grandma you can imagine playing hand tennis in the street with her grandkid.

I hope these books become beloved classics for Caribbean children for many generations—and I'm still hoping one of them will really blow up.

It's one reason I was so happy that *With Grace*, my Caribbean faerie tale, was an official selection in 2017 by the US Virgin Islands Governor for his annual summer-read challenge. I was one of the few non-Virgin Islanders, I am told, to have gotten that seal.



Given how often I was asked, when *Sabga* hit the local press—"That prize come with money?" or heard, "That ah wan warm change"—I suppose, at least financially, there's a come-up at this point in the journey.



But I also hope that children worldwide discover these stories, just as we, Caribbean children, were fed “Goldilocks” and “Cinderella”. While I am late to the parade, I believe this genre has real potential to travel and open different worlds to the most open minds: children.

My journey as a writer is improbable and imperfect, filled with stumbles and missteps, and so many valleys. If there’s an “Okay, you’ve made it” point, I haven’t met it yet. But given how often I was asked, when Sabga hit the local press—“That prize come with money?” or heard, “That ah wan warm change”—I suppose, at least financially, there’s a come-up at this point in the journey. And it’s the kind of validation that people recognise.

But the most important thing to me is, and has been, that I get to tell my stories and, where I can, get to facilitate others’ telling their stories, as well.

One of the mediums that has facilitated my story-telling is the various journals and contests I’ve submitted to over the years—poems, fiction, non-fiction that don’t fit the commercial markets I’m usually pitching to—but working the same muscle, stepping out on a cliff, leaping, and hoping your body won’t break against the rocks. In time, you develop the calluses needed to not feel the rejections as a personal slight

or a condemnation of you as a writer.

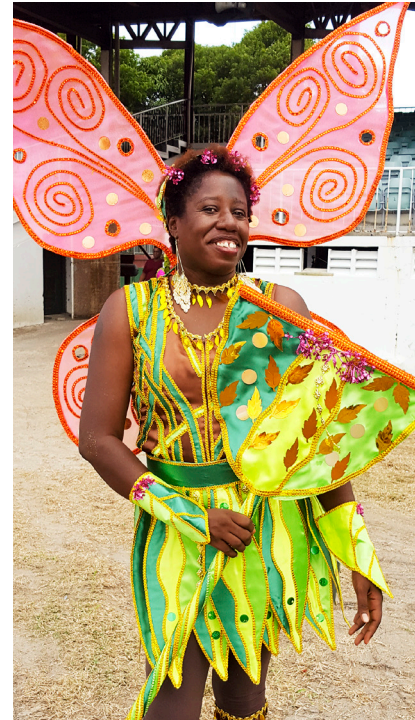
There’ve been more “No’s” than “Yes’es” when it comes to submissions; so why do it? Well, there is something in it that motivates me.

When I was published for the first time in *The Caribbean Writer*—after so many years of rejections—it felt like a breakthrough, although, arguably, I’d already had a breakthrough with a book-production deal. I actually published “Rhythms” and “Ah Write” in *The Caribbean Writer* in 2004, the year my second book under the Macmillan deal was published.

I’ve published many times with *The Caribbean Writer* since and won two of its annual prizes; but that first year, clearing the bar felt huge, and that poem and story remain two of my favourites.

The poem, especially—first workshopped in local open mics—became one of my signature performance pieces and, fun fact, the only thing I’ve written that I’ve been able to memorise.

I don’t think I would have amassed the short-story collection I’ve been working on these several years without these rigorous efforts to publish shorter pieces. Oddly, this intensified after I finished my first full-length novel, which was a marathon, and I just wanted

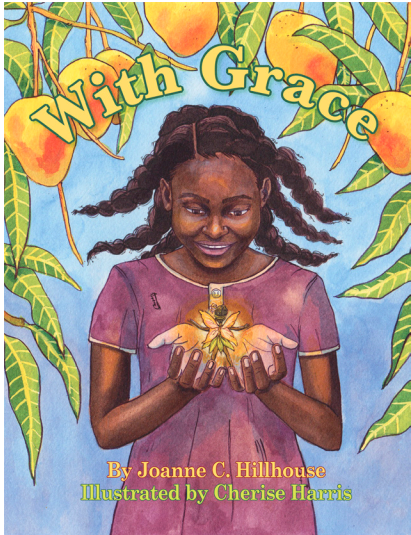


to get back to working out technique and form and was less interested in publishing another book.

I once wrote a poem called “Stealing Life” [as already mentioned] in which I muse on some of the things I borrow—something as small as one of my nieces’ smiles, filed away unconsciously, and pulled out as needed. I don’t believe in watering down. I lean into the details, into the specific—in terms of language, taste, all the senses, all the ways we are specific; and this is important to me.

As for being a #gyalfromOttosAntigua... a few years ago, my brother expressed surprised that I even remembered what I think of as my first home in Ottos. He informed me that I was actually born in Sea View Farm.

My father is from Sea View Farm and my mom was living there with him, and my sister by then, and that’s where I came in. Yet, my grandparents’ home—Papa and Tanty’s house on Camacho’s Avenue that included my mother, my siblings, cousin, the home that became the template for the one in Willow Bend—was the first home I remembered.



Other family is vaguer. My sister had to remind me of the woman we stayed with in Dominica, as children, my mother's mother. I don't remember her face or that she had long hair—which my sister insists on. What I remember vividly of that summer is the havoc caused by Hurricane David and the book, lifted during looting, with which I returned to Antigua. A book I still have.

I remember my father's mother, Mama, though she, too, died when I was young. I remember her as very tall, but everything is big when you're a child.

When I wrote the Mama character in *Oh Gad!* I wasn't writing her in a literal way—stealing life is never a literal thing—but the measure of her: her height, her imposing presence, that she was a respected coal-pot maker and matriarch. Yes, those things are stolen from life. I'm sure Mama never had a child with a professor who lived in America, who, on her dying, came home to find her roots.

My dad asserts that keeping us connected to our roots was why he would take me and my sister to Sea View Farm on Saturdays. But the timid child I was then would have felt it as "abandoned" us there.

I was, as far as I knew, a child of Ottos—which I still visit often, though not, strictly speaking, my former homes—the longest of which, the one with the outside toilet, last time I saw it, I could see right through, ripped apart by time and neglect, barely holding itself together at the seams. Not unlike families in that way.

When I write, even unintentionally, I write of Ottos...but as *Oh Gad!* proves, I'm also writing of Sea View Farm. And in stories like "The Night the World Ended", published in *The Caribbean Writer*, I am also writing of Dominica, though the story is still subconsciously set on a nameless Antigua that has the feel of Ottos.

Writing is a journey, and, for this gyal, that journey began in Ottos, Antigua. The texture of our lived reality and our imagining is so rich, oceans of it still to be explored. The fact that I can't swim to that really makes this metaphor work for me, oddly enough: It's the not-being-able-to-feel-the-bottom; the fear; the unfathomableness of it all.

Meanwhile, I keep writing, I scout for opportunities, I try to get out of my own way. That's the process of getting published for me

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When she was growing up, we didn't have stories about us written down in a book that we knew of, she said—and now we do.

”
One morning, after I'd been on radio discussing the Sabga prize and my writing journey, an older woman stopped me in the street. When she was growing up, we didn't have stories about us written down in a book that we knew of, she said—and now we do.

My experience is not much different from hers. So I don't take lightly either the writing or the advocacy that I do; nor the travelling that I and, sometimes, just my words have done, as a gyal from Ottos, Antigua... mythology, though, that might be.

Mythologies have their purpose and mine has helped to orient me, positioning me to tell specific stories that nobody sent for—but which show up, anyway, insisting on their right to exist.



DR ADESH SIRJUSINGH

Our Public & Civic Contributions Laureate, 2023

Dr Adesh Sirjusingh is a women's health doctor who works in the public health system in Trinidad & Tobago. His major accomplishment to date has been the implementation of systems to dramatically reduce maternal and infant mortality. Beyond his job as the transformative Director of Women's Health, he continues to serve his community.

It is indeed a great honour to have been selected as a 2023 Anthony N Sabga Laureate. It is truly humbling to share the accolade with great fellow Caribbean intellectuals and innovators.

It is a proud moment for me, my family, my many colleagues and for the profession of medicine. I give thanks to those who recommended me, starting with my lifelong friends and colleagues, from both local and international organisations.

With this honour, I believe that this also comes with additional responsibility to continue my work beyond my direct professional responsibilities, related to my current portfolio in the Ministry of Health. These include ensuring a future generation of babies are born in the best circumstances, free from as many preventable illnesses, before and during childbirth. I will strive to ensure the developments and improvements in early newborn care and survival initiatives with training, infrastructure, staffing and long-term planning, remain the gold standard.

I recognise that as long as I am able to do so, I will continue to educate the public and fellow health professionals and hopefully plant pearls of wisdom and seeds of knowledge that may influence others to undertake a journey in public service.

Throughout my life, I was surrounded by great mentors and inspirational family members. These people have achievements that possibly surpassed what I have obtained so far, and they too deserve much credit. I have followed their guidance and I urge our future leaders to absorb as many positives as you can from those in authority.

As a mentor, however, I have also taught others to sometimes learn what never to do or become. Learn from the negatives as well.

Early life

My first recollection of life was somewhere around the start of the 1970s. My childhood days were typical of that generation growing up in a rural village at that time. The days before technology was commonplace. Humility and courtesy were the foundation blocks of the time period.

I was surrounded by my large family, extended family of cousins and villagers, who all played a role in my formative years.

The challenges we faced were important in my view, as they made me appreciate success and the accomplishments along the way. While a village can help raise an individual, you should also be aware that you can often learn what too can lead you astray. In our village, there were many

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My older cousin, Dr Rohit Doon, had graduated as a doctor in the 1970s and little did he know that whenever he visited, I was glued to everything he stated.

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“
Sometimes, we had to join a line of villagers with buckets at the village communal standpipe.
”

positives but there were negatives of alcohol abuse, suicides, neighborhood squabbles and domestic abuse. People often lived day to day, as basic life needs were a priority, such as obtaining food and potable water. Long-term visions and planning were not the norm. Unfortunately, I saw many of my classmates and friends lose focus along the way.

It is difficult to describe the family challenges that one faced in those days, but these included financial and basic resources that are not usually

an issue for today's society. Imagine life without a telephone, laptop, tablet, mobile phone, internet and other technology.

It goes without saying that my parents and my siblings were key to my early support and success. As I write this, I can hear the voices and feel the stares of my sisters, who would certainly have played a major role in my early achievements.

My late father toiled and struggled, and with his efforts, his personal success and ours followed too. He eventually became a Chief Immigration Officer of our country at the end of a long public service career. He was a disciplinarian and ensured that he prepared us for both academic and real-life successes. His leadership style was unique but provided me with opportunities to develop my own style as well. Throughout it all, my mother was the backbone of the family, and she continues to provide never-ending support to this day.

Village life (1970s) memories

- A typical school day included looking after the needs of our chickens and goats.
- Sometimes, we had to join a line of villagers with buckets at the village communal standpipe.
- Getting kerosene for our lamps prior to reliable electricity.
- Milking cows by my uncle and riding on the donkey cart to the sugar cane plantations in the Orange Grove sugar estate with my cousins, to play and also assist with getting fresh grass for the animals.
- Life was in black and white literally, with a single television channel, and a radio being the window to the outside world.
- I loved reading the newspaper and scrutinised every word, including the classified ads.



- Reading books was a passion, especially adventure stories that filled your imagination of life in other countries and worlds that were far out of reach.
- Visiting the airport regularly with my dad and watching the foreign visitors and listening to their various languages.
- The sugar cane industry was embedded in our daily life. Many villagers toiled in the nearby cane fields and by 4a.m., the entire village was abuzz with activity as the adults headed off.
- I learnt and participated in many sports at the nearby recreational grounds of the formerly named Orange Grove Savannah. We all imagined ourselves as national cricketers and footballers, as we spent hours there every week. The savannah was also more exciting as it was populated with some marshlands that were home to

many caimans, wildlife and fish.

- I witnessed the development of infrastructure and the housing developments firsthand as the area became modernised.

Primary school

In those days, paved roads were reserved for the major roads. My sisters and I walked freely on the dirt roads to our fantastic primary school, the Tacarigua Presbyterian School. The combination of devoted teachers and religious education developed my moral and personal ethical compass. Growing up in two religious settings as well as having a variety of friends from various ethnic and social backgrounds, was fertile ground for nationalism, discipline and tolerance.

It was here that my excellent teachers developed my talents and further introduced me to the outside world. At primary school, I attained several awards as well as a national award for performance at the exit level

standards. I will always cherish the instructions from our standard 5 teacher, Mr Carol Jitman. Becoming a doctor was imprinted on me at this impressionable time, as my fellow villagers gave me the nickname of 'Young Doc'.

Early family influencers

My paternal grandmother was also an authoritative figure for the family and the village, as our home was a stone's throw away from hers. She was also in charge of the Dinsley Village temple, and my cousins and I were inculcated at an early age into religion, taking care of the temple and donating time and energy to assist others.

My older cousin, Dr Rohit Doon, had graduated as a doctor in the 1970s and little did he know that whenever he visited, I was glued to everything he stated. He was one of my first mentors. He eventually became the Chief Medical Officer of our country. Leadership roles in our family were not infrequent.

“
Despite severe chiding from my senior colleague, I departed and returned to a full-time public service post at a Regional Health Authority in 2009—Sangre Grande Hospital.
”

St. Mary's College (CIC) 1979-1985

At secondary school, there were also challenges. I started at St. Mary's College (CIC) in 1979, and for an 11-year-old village boy, the daily commute to and from the capital city took its toll. Roads and transportation systems were still being developed. However, the best part of this remains the lifelong friendship and support from a fantastic group of friends.

A group of friends were nicknamed the 'Punjab 5' in form 6 and, we still provide regular feedback and support to one another to this day.

UWI (1985-1990)

Academic success at the GCE A level examinations in 1985 led to a national scholarship that paved the way for a 17-year-old to enter the medical class of 1990 at the University of the West Indies, at Mona, Jamaica. I had to grow up quickly and the help of a close group of fellow students made academic success easier to achieve. This group also somehow adopted the name of the Punjab Posse, being mostly of East Indian origin and one of Chinese, riding bicycles together to class around the campus. Those colleagues as well continuously support each other and are all specialists in their own fields of medical practice.

Also, during my final year of undergraduate university, I met Professor Samuel Ramsewak, who had just returned from Sheffield, UK. Our



friendship grew during my junior years and evolved in the new century, as he became my main source of guidance and mentorship. He eventually encouraged me into the academic faculty, and we remain colleagues and friends to this day. He and his wife, Sherry, have been alongside me and have always provided solid support.

As one of the youngest doctors to graduate at the age of 22 years, my medical career began at several of our public hospitals. As I started my internship period in July 1990, our country was affected by the 'coup' of 1990 and that brought additional challenges to my work life at the San Fernando General Hospital.

Early career and beyond

My early passion for paediatrics became thwarted as it was difficult emotionally to face ill children daily, far

less losing a child to illness despite the team's best efforts. The road led me to another field of medicine.

Along my medical schooling, however, the excellent obstetricians at both Port of Spain and Mt. Hope Women's Hospital aided my tunnel vision towards Obstetrics and Gynaecology (O&G). The practice of O&G, though despised by many of my fellow colleagues, was one that afforded me the ability to practise a wide range of medical fields all united into one. The ability to look after pregnancy and, of course, take care of the future of our nation even before they are born, is a significant task. The broader picture of improving women's health was not initially appreciated by me in the early days. However, I worked incessantly, attending to numerous patients with medical disorders, performing countless surgeries, improving my

clinical acumen, assisting with early newborn care, training and increasing the use of diagnostics and contributing to research publications.

The team at the Mt. Hope Women's Hospital became my work parents and nurtured me in those formative years. The late professor Syam Roopnarinesingh was one of my early and continuous supporters for many years. Along the way, Professor Bharat Bassaw became my direct supervisor and provided me with tutelage and support, which began way back as an undergraduate student in 1989. At the same time, I also met another inspirational doctor who also remains 100% supportive, Dr Hemant Persad.

Hard work was the recipe for success. Showing initiative and working longer hours than the job demanded brought along additional career opportunities and advancements.

Cindy

During this time, I was also able to meet my future wife, got married at the early age of 23, and we both faced life's challenges together. In this case, having her support contributed, as it would have been even more of a task to do this solo. Living paycheck to paycheck was the norm for those early days both in Trinidad and in the United Kingdom, as I undertook specialist training in 1995-1998. Behind every man is always a great woman. For over 31 years, my wife has been beside me through many good as well as difficult times. In this success, she was equally important.

United Kingdom 1995-1998

This was as exciting, as it was an adventure. The West Indian doctors were known for our tremendous experience in the field, so when I started at a senior post in the UK in O&G, much was expected. It was here I learnt additional skills and fine-tuned my practice, ensuring that I became a Member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. I



was also assigned as the lead on the development of protocols for the Labour Ward, which had important administrative and research personal development aspects for me. My time in the UK opened many doors as we were enticed to remain there to remain in their public health service. My yearning for the Caribbean won the battle and I returned home in 1998, resuming my public service posting.

UWI Academic Career

In the 1990s, I always worked with the university-led units, so I was inculcated into the training of undergraduate and postgraduate students seamlessly, even while working in the public

service. I became the local expert in organising the practical exams, and twice a year, my organisational skills were tested for many years, as I coordinated over a hundred students, patients and examiners over days of exams. I also became further involved in the publication of research papers and contributed to medical textbooks along the way.

Somewhere at the turn of the century, I was given the opportunity on several occasions to be a temporary lecturer and I transformed into a full lecturer during 2006 to 2009. I was able to assist with the transformation of undergraduate and postgraduate training both locally and across the



campuses. I thoroughly enjoyed this time but eventually found that I was not able to contribute as I would have liked to the public as I had done before. Despite severe chiding from my senior colleague, I departed and returned to a full-time public service post at a Regional Health Authority in 2009—Sangre Grande Hospital.

It was here that I also set about a

transformation that would eventually benefit the public by ensuring the hospital became fully accredited for undergraduate and postgraduate training. This allowed the establishment of a satellite office of the UWI and led to groups of students having more focused training here. This also improved the training at the main sites as they too now had a more manageable number of students.

Postgraduate training of candidates also began, with my first student there, Dr Brequelle Timothy, placing first at her UWI Doctor of Medicine UWI exams across all campuses.

2023

Fast-forward to 33 years after graduation, my career has spanned it all, from a newbie intern, a specialist, a university lecturer, to overseeing the Sangre Grande Hospital and then from 2017, onto assuming a new national position created to improve the outcomes for mothers and newborn infants.

There is no simple recipe to success. It involves dedication and sacrifice. Seeing the long-term larger endpoint is critical. Assembling teams of fellow-minded professionals to be part of your team is essential.

As a doctor in public service, I did what I could to develop initiatives, to improve processes and patients' outcomes. I prided myself on having the longest operation lists and having the shortest waiting times for clients to have surgery and to be seen in my clinics. To this day, I am always teased by my mentors about my before daybreak ward rounds, getting a head start on the tasks at hand.

In 2017, I assumed the position of Director of Women's Health and worked to create the unit from the ground up, starting with just myself and a clerk-typist. There were early struggles but in 2023, we have a well-oiled unit of highly professional staff. There are still challenges as staff become more qualified and transition to better opportunities; however, the portfolio of work that I have created is of a sustainable nature. The team often adopts alternative approaches and uses various non-medical approaches to solve medical issues.

Continuous medical education is critical for medical professionals. Staying grounded and treating patients and relatives with dignity



Hard work was the recipe for success.

are paramount. Freely giving your knowledge to patients and professionals alike is important, as we pay it forward. Mentoring numerous people and taking pride in their success was all the reward needed to keep motivated.

Representing our country at national, regional and international committees and meetings are personal achievements that I am proud of, and I fly the national colours with honour at every opportunity to do so. My journey has taken me to Colombia, Brazil, Panama and our Caribbean islands. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has been a major partner in this journey, with a former consultant, Ms Izola Garcia, holding my hand throughout it all.

Along the way, getting involved in healthcare administration was not something a clinician takes to seamlessly, but it became a natural progression for me and became the means to help achieve more for the public rather than attempting to do so one patient at a time.

Publications in journals, investigative reports, chapters in books, formation of committees, creation of policies and patient education materials are important in the service of our country. Learning from what went wrong to make it right, especially in disastrous maternal and newborn events, these recommendations were essential to my public and civic contributions.

My current portfolio provides me with the opportunity to provide learning opportunities to colleagues in the rest of the Caribbean as well as in Latin America, with areas related to standardising the health response to intimate partner violence, prioritising exclusive breastfeeding, analysis of near Maternal miss, new family planning methods, use of data and analysis in healthcare to provide targeted responses with efficient use of resources, the creation of a national prenatal digital clinical record, and the provision of training opportunities and training resources to better equip current and future healthcare workers.

Over my career, I have managed thousands of patients and continue to do so. My service has spanned from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom. The majority of my clinical work was in the public service with a little in the private sector. Numerous outreaches and medical fairs also brought me closer to the population and provided an opportunity to assist persons in need outside of the traditional health office setting.

UNFPA

Ms Aurora Noguera-Ramkissoon, Liaison Officer, is another key partner who worked tirelessly with me to institute many public health interventions, including introducing new contraceptive choices, training for healthcare staff, public education, support for our Spanish-speaking non-nationals, research and donation of training models and medication, amongst other support.

COVID-19 years

The pandemic health response was both the most difficult period of my career and a learning opportunity. There was no reference manual for the recipe to manage the event other than by using your training and experience while keeping abreast of the medical information as it was published. The armchair critics and experts did not assist but created hurdles and often contributed to the impressionable public to not follow medical advice. A notable achievement despite this was the support from the healthcare system and our staff that ensured, in our country, all maternal and newborn services were kept open, unlike in many developed countries. Without this, we could have seen even more loss of life of our mothers and newborn infants. We were able to successfully create isolation areas within our public maternity and neonatal units to house our patients with COVID-19 and to allow full access to care from our dedicated teams of healthcare workers.



Public education

To aid public education and awareness, I ensured the creation of over 100 patient information brochures, frequently asked questions, policies, clinical management guidelines, and a website for free access to these to ensure the public keeps us accountable to a high standard of health care. In addition, I have recorded over 60 educational television appearances and full programmes on women's health issues. I encourage the reader to visit the webpage <https://health.gov.tt/services/womens-health>.

Prime Ministers' Committees

My contributions at two separate Prime Minister-appointed National Committees provided me with the excellent experience of serving with fellow like-minded countrymen that contributed their time and effort at no cost to the country. The first was a committee led by Dr Lackram Bodoie, which reviewed the root causes and offered solutions to improving the maternal and newborn services. The committee, led by Dr Winston Welch,

enquired extensively into the health sector and was able to publish a report that is in use today, which has assisted in the overall improvement in the health sector. On both occasions, walking the floor and meeting with a wide variety of healthcare staff, administrative professionals, and patients and their families, created a lasting impression on the way I conduct business.

Training and conferences

Through improving the skills of others, the public benefits, I continuously keep up to date and have kept abreast of current developments in the field of medicine. As a leader, however, I contributed to the organisation of over 100 country-wide training events that trained thousands of healthcare workers over the years in a wide array of events, including cervical cancer, breast cancer, public voluntary blood donation, digital clinical records, diabetes in pregnancy, gender-based violence, medical ethics, ultrasonography, reducing maternal deaths and post-partum haemorrhage.

My late grandmother and Sangre Grande

It's a cliché to say that life is a circle, but literally in my case, it was. My mother's family came from Sangre Grande in the East of Trinidad. It was at that very same hospital where her mother, my grandmother, had become a maternal mortality statistic shortly after giving birth, and it was where I returned to become a medical chief of staff. Here I was faced with local and national issues where maternal deaths were almost a monthly regular occurrence, which made the Government take notice.

The achievements at the Sangre Grande Hospital in the period 2009 to 2017 remain etched in my portfolio. It was here I was provided by my predecessors, including my fellow 1990 classmate, Dr Dale Hassranah, an excellent template to achieve success. This included expansion of the services and improvements in the service delivery with additional staffing, infrastructure and accreditation for training. The priority area always directly under my vigil was maternal



and newborn outcomes. A superlative unit was created that spawned many future specialists.

Inter-American Bank (IDB)

Recently, for several years, my team at the Ministry of Health has been working with the IDB, with tremendous support from the Executive of the Ministry of Health, and in particular, the Project implementation Unit, led by their Technical Director, Renée Franklin.

This project has seen tremendous success with the care of women with diabetes mellitus in pregnancy, which possibly affects as many as 1 in 6 pregnancies in our country. Our work has seen improvements in digital health care, training of staff and expansion of resources for patients and healthcare workers. In 2019, my team was shortlisted for the IDB 2019 President's Award for Service Excellence in the Public Sector.



A notable achievement despite this was the support from the healthcare system and our staff that ensured, in our country, all maternal and newborn services were kept open, unlike in many developed countries. Without this, we could have seen even more loss of life of our mothers and newborn infants.



Trinidad and Tobago recognised by the PAHO and the WHO

As a result of the work done in the recent past by the teams of healthcare workers across our country, in the past few years, our country has been recognised for the achievements in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals 2030—targets set for both maternal and newborn health since 2018 and continuing. This has culminated in 2023 with the first-ever publication of data from Trinidad and Tobago being represented on the worldwide level at the Maternal Mortality Inter-Agency group of the WHO, the UNFPA, the World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division. For the first time, our data, which is internationally verified and comparable, shows our improvements in the care of our women and the attainment of a high standard of care.

Advancements in Neonatal care

Special credit must always go to my partner in success, Dr Marlon Timothy, a specialist neonatologist and friend, forever. Without him by my side, the national improvements in newborn health would not have been achieved.



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It was at that very same hospital where her mother, my grandmother, had become a maternal mortality statistic shortly after giving birth, and it was where I returned to become a medical chief of staff.
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In recent years, interventions have led to improved staffing, infrastructure and equipment for all the neonatal units in our country. I am especially proud of the developments in Tobago and the team led by Dr Victor Wheeler, where the unit was upgraded. This meant that inter-island transfers via helicopters were significantly reduced, leading to improved outcomes for mothers and babies.

Respectful Maternity Care

In the recent past, I have championed the need for improved customer service and accountability to the public. A wind of change is hopefully moving across the system, with more patient-friendly practices being adopted by the teams. This includes longer visitation hours and times, partners present during labour and delivery, babies being put to the mother's skin and to the breast immediately at birth, allowing food during labour, no confinement to a bed for labour—allowing mobility and allowing mothers to use alternative positions to deliver babies. To this end, all relevant staff are getting formal training and certification provided by the PAHO training campus.

Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association (T&TMA)

I must acknowledge the support of the T&TMA. From my entry into the medical fraternity, I have encountered many exemplars of the profession and several presidents who influenced me, in addition to providing me with an avenue to contribute to the public and to my colleagues. In 2023, I was privileged to receive a significant honour from the T&TMA for my contribution to the field of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

The future

It is important for one growing up in the Caribbean, and especially for those in Trinidad and Tobago, to recognise and be thankful for everything we possess that enables us to achieve. We are blessed generally with a supportive environment, improving infrastructure, the highest educational standards, numerous initiatives and even scholarships for higher learning, all funded through our public taxpayers. It should, therefore, be easy for those who achieved to give back in time or in kind to our society.



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Keep finding solutions rather than creating problems and roadblocks for ideas and innovations. Be supportive rather than a destroyer of ideas.

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The future is bright. Advances in technology continue to assist with medical training and patient care outcomes. My son is a budding doctor and his world will be far different from the one that I started my medical career in. So, too, for my daughter who is enjoying the science field. This is how it was meant to be. Keep finding solutions rather than creating problems and roadblocks for ideas and innovations. Be supportive rather than a destroyer of ideas.

To every person in authority, I end with this important quote so that you understand the power that you hold.

From the late 16th American President, Abraham Lincoln:

“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

Too often, I have seen the hidden personalities of individuals revealed when they assume higher positions, and so I urge my fellow awardees to remain grounded and stay the course and follow the same pathways that led us to this moment.





DR MAHENDRA PERSAUD, A.A.

Our Science & Technology Laureate, 2023

Dr Mahendra Persaud is a plant scientist and rice breeder who has led a team responsible for breeding rice varieties that have increased Guyanese rice yields by upwards of 50%. He somehow navigates the world of politics and science, dependent always on the feedback of the farmers whose lives and livelihoods he has transformed.

“Where there is a will, there is a way”.

Born to a goldsmith and a housewife in 1974, I was the only brother to three sisters. As society would have had, my path was perceived as a goldsmith. I, however, was determined to walk the path of an academic, one that was very foreign to my family.

Growing up in Bath Settlement, Berbice, which is the countryside of Guyana, farming, large scale or kitchen garden, was a necessity. This norm was not a stranger to my family as basic necessities were not readily available to us. From carrying water for meters to selling our products, I did it all while pursuing my education. As a young child, I was always passionate about our garden since it was my responsibility.

At the age of 5, I attended Woodley Park Primary School, a kilometer away from our home, and footing it with my siblings was the only way to go. Being the top student of the school in the National Grade Six Examination, I gained a place at Berbice High School. Getting to high school required several modes of transportation, which included bus, ferry and footing. Leaving home at 5:30 a.m. and coming back at 6:00 pm, to and from school, was a daily struggle for my parents and me both financially and physically. This lasted for just about a year because of the worsening of the

financial situation, after which I was forced to relocate to a school closer to home (Bush Lot Secondary School). Soon after, cycling 16 km to and from school became the new routine. Balancing gardening, chores and academia all seemed worth it when I graduated as the valedictorian of the school in 1991.

Even though medicine was my desire, pursuing it was not forthcoming due to our situation. Since caring for plants was a part of my everyday life, advancing in this field was natural to me. This led me to apply to the Guyana School of Agriculture, where I stayed two years in the dormitory in pursuit of a Diploma in Agriculture. This school is known to groom the characters and lives of many. I developed key skills in critical thinking, problem-solving and the importance of teamwork, as they have a practical and scientific approach to teaching that shaped my career in so many ways.

After graduating with a diploma in agriculture, I was motivated to pursue my degree from the University of Guyana. With limited resources and minimal living conditions, I was determined to achieve the goals set forth for myself. Little did I know, the journey I embarked upon was nothing I had experienced before. However, in the new era of technology, I quickly realised that my usual approach to life's situation needed more than improvisation. I recalled having to do

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“ I recalled having to do an assignment that had to be typed and printed, which I could not afford. My attempt to complete it by hand was not appreciated, and even though my work was right, I was penalised for not complying with the lecturer’s instructions and was given only 50% of the marks.

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an assignment that had to be typed and printed, which I could not afford. My attempt to complete it by hand was not appreciated, and even though my work was right, I was penalised for not complying with the lecturer’s instructions and was given only 50% of the marks.

Similarly, many times, lecturers would give notes for copying at the printery, which would always put me in a dilemma. I could either copy or buy groceries for cooking. The allowances afforded by my parents were not enough for both. I resorted to borrowing the handouts after my classmates had finished and studied them thoroughly while making notes overnight, just so I could return them in the morning. Life at this point was draining. While my classmates would visit the cafeteria during lecture breaks, I would visit the water fountain for a sip to refresh.

With encouragement from my

mentors; Dr Permaul and Dr Eden, I remained persistent in achieving my goals, knowing that better days were ahead. Even though the conditions were not ideal, I always strove for the best and continued to work hard in every course. Population and Quantitative Genetics was one of the courses that always stuck out to me. Skills from this course are still applicable in my research today.

Shortly after the final exam for the completion of my BSc degree, I was fortunate enough to be recruited by Guyana Rice Development Board in 1997. As a Research Assistant in the Plant Breeding department, I became particularly interested in the genetic manipulation of plants. Valuable skillsets in the practical aspect of Rice Breeding were obtained by working under the supervision of Dr M.N. Shrivastava (Indian Expert) in this department. With the departure of Dr Shrivastava from Guyana, the department activities were left to me



to coordinate, which involved planning and implementing the programme of work. This was definitely a learning experience for me, as my skillset was limited at that time. This helped me to develop technical writing and experimentation in plant breeding. At this point, my life was shared between fulfilling the duties of a researcher and a son. During the week, I worked at GRDB and on the weekends, I assisted my parents in their small business.

Whilst working at GRDB, I applied for many Scholarships to assist me in pursuing an MSc, but I did not receive one. Moving forward from this rejection, I decided to start the next chapter of my life; marriage and family. I married the love of my life, Shevanie, in the first quarter of the year 2000. In July 2000, I got a call from the Indian High Commission in Guyana that I was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue an MSc in Plant Breeding and Genetics at the Indira Gandhi Agricultural University

(IGAU) in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India, in September of 2000. Even though I was very happy that I received a scholarship, I thought it was a bit too late as I was carving out a different path.

With the blessings and encouragement from my wife and family, I left for India on 30th August 2000. I spent my first semester of the Master's programme in the dormitory. Moving to a new country came with its challenges, such as language barrier, environmental changes, change of weather, food, health issues and the continuous agony of missing my family. The limits to communication at that time did not help my situation. Despite this, I was focused on the opportunity to be trained in a skillset that is much needed by my country. Fortunately, my wife was able to accompany me to India after the first semester. The university was very kind to provide accommodation for us to live in; an apartment in the staff's family hostel.

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We lived amongst some wonderful families.

For me, whilst dedicated to my studies, starting my family was of much importance. Just one week before my final exams for the master's programme, my wife and I were blessed with our first daughter 'Shilpy'. Even though it was challenging being a family person and a student at that time, I had the best grades for that semester.

My wife was my biggest supporter in everything I did. She gave me the impetus to go further. With her encouragement, I felt that I was able to move mountains. She was very much a part of my thesis, from helping with preparing samples for nurseries to editing my manuscript, all while taking care of our eldest daughter. I am fortunate to have had her by my side in those difficult times.

My thesis research on 'Genetics of Blast Resistance and Isolation of

Resistant Donors in Some Rice (*Oryza sativa* L.)' was the first attempt to study the genetics of rice blast at IGAU and in that State under the guidance of Dr M.N. Srivastava and others. I completed on a high note with First Division Ranking.

The novelty of my work made me passionate, and so I tried to secure a second scholarship to complete my Ph.D. at the same university to advance studies in 'Identification and genetic analysis of genes conferring resistance to blast (*Pyricularia grisea*) rice (*Oryza sativa* L.). This piece of research promised to provide a genetic understanding of the blast to architect crop improvement in India and Guyana. I could not have been happier to receive the news that I was awarded a fellowship by the Indian Government to do my Ph.D. Since the research was unfamiliar territory to IGAU, much work was needed. These studies gave me a comprehensive understanding of the genetics of

blast resistance, which helped me to develop several blast-resistant varieties in Guyana.

Throughout my research and studies, Drs Arvind Kumar, S.B. Verulkar, R.K. Sahu and Girish Chandel were always there to provide me with wise counsel, tremendous support and encouragement but most importantly, they were model citizens.

Upon my return to Guyana in 2006, I was appointed the position of Plant Breeder, which I still hold. I was the first of my kind in this area in Guyana, a Plant Breeder and Geneticist. The then General Manager of GRDB, Mr Jaganarine Singh, and my immediate boss, the late Mr L. Small, were extremely supportive. I recalled our first conversation when I showed my work programme for the short, medium, and long term as a breeder. Mr Singh's only question was, "Can you achieve all of this?" I said, "Yes, Chief". He promptly said, "You proceed, and let me know what you need". Dr Permaul

For a decade and a half, with only the techniques in conventional breeding, my team and I were able to continuously release improved varieties with tolerance to lodging and disease-resistant, which emerge excellently under flooded conditions, with superior grain qualities, which are well-suited to the local, regional and global markets.

was the Chair of the Board of Directors of GRDB at that time. The confidence these men had in me and the latitude given to me as a young researcher to implement the Breeding programme really fuelled me to go further and beyond to achieve success for the farmers. I am beyond grateful to them for the unequivocal support, guidance and words of encouragement that extended beyond my professional life.

My position as a plant breeder required critical thinking, practicality, experimentation, managerial skills and extensive networking. In the year 2008, I was trusted with the additional responsibilities of the operation of the entire Rice Research Station as the Chief Scientist. As a Breeder, I was given the chance to be a member of the technical committee of the Latin American Fund for Irrigated Rice (FLAR). As a member country, I had the opportunity to be part of a team that was involved in the evaluation of the technical programme of FLAR and their country programme. I participated in the Workshop on Evaluation and Selection of FLAR Germplasm. The selected germplasms would be incorporated into the local breeding programme for varietal improvement. Simultaneously, I was a member of the Research and Extension Sub-Committee Board of Directors of the Guyana Rice Development Board; and a Member of the Management Committee of the Guyana Rice Development Board.

In early 2008, my wife and I were blessed with our second daughter, 'Shilpa'. Shortly after her birth, she was diagnosed with a severe heart





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With critical support from my team of research scientists, research assistants, technicians and labourers, rice yields increased from a national average of 4 tonnes per hectare to 6 tonnes per hectare.
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condition. Juggling my personal and professional life was very taxing at this point. However, I was motivated to continue to push on the research on my first two varieties (GRDB 9 and GRDB FL 10), which were subsequently released in 2009. To this day, GRDB FL 10 is one of my most successful varieties, and it is still preferred by the

farming community in Guyana.

I was privileged to represent Guyana on the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture at its 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th Sessions (2011 to 2019). I became the National Focal Point on the International Treaty of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agricultural Organization (ITPGRFA) and participated in the 7th, 8th and 9th Session (2017, 2019 and 2022) of the World Governing Body of the ITPGRFA. I am also fortunate to serve as the National Focal Point on State of the World Biodiversity for FAO and benefited from several Intergovernmental Technical Working Groups of the FAO, which include Plant Genetic Resources, Access and Benefit-Sharing, and State of the World Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture whilst serving as a member of the Compliance Committee of the ITPGRFA. As my networking circle expanded, my scientific contributions to Guyana were noticed. For a decade

and a half, with only the techniques in conventional breeding, my team and I were able to continuously release improved varieties with tolerance to lodging and disease-resistant, which emerge excellently under flooded conditions, with superior grain qualities, which are well-suited to the local, regional, and global markets.

My field of work expanded beyond the rice industry. From 2012 to 2020, I was tasked with the responsibility to Chair the Research Advisory Committee, as a member of the board of directors of the National Agricultural Research and Extension Institute. This was to provide strategic direction and policy initiative and leadership to the scientific staff of the Institute. In 2014, I was identified as the Agriculture specialist on the rice assessment committee for regions 4 and 5. This helped me to develop my conflict resolution skills, as I acted to assist farmers in resolving conflicts with regard to the Rice Farmer Security of Tenure Act.



During the period from 2011 to 2015, I released four varieties; GRDB FL 11, GRDB FL 12, GRDB 13 and GRDB FL 14. The first aromatic variety released in Guyana and even in South America was GRDB 13. In the first quarter of 2015, my team and I were awarded the Exemplary Performance Award for dedication and commendable performance in continually delivering New Varieties and Improved Technologies to the Industry and showing innovation every step of the way by the Board of Directors, Management and Staff of the GRDB. With my varieties being such a hit, in 2016, I was awarded the Golden Arrow of Achievement for outstanding research as a scientist

in the rice industry in high-yielding varieties with consequential increased rice production by the Cooperative Republic of Guyana. At this time, I felt that all my hard work and difficult journey had paid off. However, I was more motivated than ever to go further and beyond.

Apart from my fieldwork, which contributes to the economic and humanitarian sector of the region, I also manage to share my knowledge and findings throughout the scientific community via publications in International Journals, Proceedings of National and International Conferences and Workshops. I am an editor for the Tropical Agricultural

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My heart is so focused on the struggles of the farmers. The smiles on their faces when they receive a good harvest from a new variety are the most rewarding part of my job.
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Journal and Saudi Journal of Biological Sciences and also a part-time lecturer at the University of Guyana, delivering courses in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry; and The Faculty of Natural Sciences. In addition, I serve as a member of the Board of Governors, Mahaicony Technical and Vocational Training Center and a Member of the Board of Directors, Guyana School of Agriculture.

In 2018, I was fortunate to be a part of the XIII International Rice Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean, among many others. The goal of the International Rice Research Conference was to bring together leading scientists and thinkers from across the globe to address the upcoming issues facing rice-based food systems and to provide innovative and captivating solutions.

Food security is essential for human health, social stability, economic development and environmental sustainability. The opportunity to attend an international workshop on OIC Country Experience in Food Security Governance for Strengthening South-South Cooperation has allowed me to take part in discussions on the complex issues that govern food insecurity. Over the past seven years, I have participated in the Workshop on Evaluation and Selection of FLAR



Germplasm and also in the First Meeting of the Group of National Focal Points for Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, among so many other related international meetings and workshops. These were crucial in the vitality of sustainable agriculture and food security in the region, as well as the world as a whole.

With critical support from my team of research scientists, research assistants, technicians and labourers, rice yields increased from a national average of 4 tonnes per hectare to 6 tonnes per hectare. I released two new high-yielding varieties: GRDB FL 15 (2018) and GRDB FL 16 (2020) before and during the pandemic. These varieties can produce up to 8-9 tonnes/ha. A decade ago, no farmer in Guyana could have ever imagined such high rice yields, but now it is the new reality and benchmark of productivity.

The trials for the GRDB 16 variety commence in November 2019, with subsequent release in October 2020. The major constraints encountered during the trials were as a result of the pandemic. The availability of human resources, among others, was at risk and so were our trials. The uncertainty of the pandemic and the risk to lives COVID-19 presented posed a threat to the trials. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm of my team and I did not break and we emerged with success in the middle of the pandemic. Further, varieties GRDB 11, 12, 14, 15 and 16 possess an excellent ability to emerge well from standing water, tillers, and canopies very quickly to cover the field. These abilities significantly reduce weed populations in the fields, thereby reducing pesticides (weedicides). I am the lead rice breeder in CARICOM Biofortification Network (CBN), working along with IICA and FLAR/CIAT

and others to develop rice varieties with higher levels of Zinc. One candidate variety is currently being tested in farmers' fields for release as a variety very shortly.

The national average for the year 2020 was approx 6.0 t/ha; as the national productivity has increased by almost 2t/ha in the last 15 years as a result of these varieties. These varieties now occupy more than 80% of the total rice cultivated area in Guyana. In 2021, Guyana was able to export 75% of the rice it produces to 42 countries, including CARICOM, Latin America, the European Union and North America.

In 2022, the government of Guyana's mandate to contribute to regional food security involved the introduction of the cultivation of wheat in the region as another staple with the aim of controlling regional producers and limiting importation. Via the Ministry of Agriculture, in 2022, I was appointed as the Program Leader to Introduce wheat as a crop in Guyana. In support of this process and the development of new varieties, Guyana's first national Rice Gene Bank was commissioned at the Rice Research Station in October 2022. This Bank is a vital component in the conservation and preservation of the plant genetic resources of Guyana and the Caribbean as a whole. With intense research and experimentation, I can safely say wheat can be grown in Guyana. The production of wheat in Guyana can have a positive impact on the region's food security and our country's economy.

Being a researcher has been so fulfilling over the years. My heart is so focused on the struggles of the farmers. The smiles on their faces when they receive a good harvest from a new variety are the most rewarding part of my job. I am convinced Guyana has some of the smartest farmers in the world. The support I received from the farmers over the years is incredible and undeniable. There

were many instances when I was going through tough circumstances and thought of taking a different path, and the farmers would provide the needed encouragement to continue and suggested that I stay on course. Especially farmers like Brijdat, Tana and Uncle Bobby. Brijdat would say, "Not many people may understand what you are doing for the farmers, but think of what will happen to us without your work".

Spending quality time with my family is of utmost importance to my everyday life. It creates a balance in my life, something I very much endorsed as a person of science. I enjoy the world of cooking and creating food that is healthy and tasty for my family. It is my best way of unwinding after a busy day or week at work. My schedule does not permit me to have a lot of hobbies, but whenever I have time, I do enjoy travelling and going on adventures with my family.

Currently, my team and I are working vigorously to release another aromatic variety that is going to have excellent aroma and superior grain qualities. Trials have commenced with the hope of releasing in the near future. I have recently collaborated with FAO and IAEA on a mutation breeding programme. This initiative entails the use of irradiation (gamma and X-rays) to induce mutation to create gene recombination and variability for traits that are difficult to improve using conventional hybridisation and selection to produce climate-smart varieties. Trials for these will commence by the end of 2023.

One of the biggest struggles of conducting scientific research in a third-world country is the availability of resources to conduct long-term research projects. The task of making non-scientific administrative superiors understand what you are doing is sometimes more challenging than the research itself.

I was truly moved to be nominated by



This award has given me the platform for further collaboration with international partners, researchers, students, policymakers, and other stakeholders for the conservation and use of plant genetic resources to achieve food and nutrition security in our region.

the Guyana Nominating Committee. As a professional, I could not be happier. I was at the Rice Research Station when I received a call from the Programme Director of the Anthony N. Sabga Awards, congratulating me for being the 2023 Laureate for Science and Technology. I was speechless with uncontrollable tears of joy.

Integrity, professionalism, hard work and a 'never give up' attitude would ensure anyone a better place. This award has given me the platform for

further collaboration with international partners, researchers, students, policymakers, and other stakeholders for the conservation and use of plant genetic resources to achieve food and nutrition security in our region. Most importantly, such recognition of science and technology will stimulate and give hope to many researchers in the region and academicians to go further and beyond, as there is light at the end of the tunnel.

ANTHONY N. SABGA AWARDS

Caribbean Excellence



MORE ABOUT THE ANTHONY N SABGA AWARDS

The Selection Process

The nominees for the Anthony N. Sabga Awards – Caribbean Excellence are chosen in five territories: Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), and Trinidad & Tobago.

Each territory is covered by a Country Nominating Committee (CNC)—the members of which are themselves models of excellence in various spheres of public life.

The CNCs are mandated to select candidates with the following characteristics:

- I. A track record of consistently superior work that has demonstrated excellence, leadership and pioneering ability. The work must be a benchmark and positively referenced by

others in the field.

- II. The capacity for and likeliness of significant future achievement, being at the stage of life and career where this award could help them realise their promise and potential. They are therefore between the ages of 35 and 55.
- III. Their work has had, or is likely to have, a positive impact in the Caribbean region.
- IV. They are likely to be a worthy exemplar and must be willing to serve as a Caribbean model of excellence to inspire hope and emulation by the people of the region.

The procedures by which candidates are assessed and vetted remain

unchanged from previous years.

As before, each CNC is responsible for nominating suitable candidates. The CNCs combine their selections with those gleaned from the public calls. Once the best candidates are identified, rigorous research is done to ensure candidates' suitability. Resumés are thoroughly investigated and verified, as are candidate backgrounds.

Once the CNCs are satisfied that candidates have met the criteria, one candidate is selected in each category. Each CNC chairman then presents their committees' recommendations to the Regional Eminent Persons Panel (EPP) for final selection. Once the laureates are selected, the Programme Director confirms their

willingness to accept the awards.

Governance

The Eminent Persons Panel comprises people respected in science, art, public service, commerce, the professions and academia from throughout the region. Its members are:

- **Professor Compton Bourne, OE** (Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago) - Chairman
- **The Honourable Justice Christopher Blackman, GCM** (Barbados)
- **Mr Christopher Bovell, CD** (Jamaica)
- **Professor Bridget Brereton** (Trinidad and Tobago)
- **Dr Charmaine Gardner, SLMH** (St Lucia)
- **The Most Honourable Professor Sir Kenneth O Hall, ON, GCMJ, OJ** (Jamaica)
- **Professor E Nigel Harris, MPhil, DM, CCH** (Guyana/St. Lucia)
- **Ambassador Irwin LaRocque** (Dominica)
- **Mrs Diana Mahabir-Wyatt, MDW, Hon LLD UWI** (Trinidad and Tobago)
- **The Honourable Justice Rolston Nelson, CMT** (Trinidad and Tobago)
- **Major General (Retired) Joseph G Singh, MSS, MSc, FCMI, FRGS, RCDS** (Guyana)

Categories for Nomination

Arts & Letters includes the visual, literary and performing arts.

Visual and plastic arts include painting, photography, drawing, film, fashion, graphic arts, illustration, architectural design, sculpture, costume-making,

ceramics, metalworking, woodwork, couture and the textile arts.

Performing arts includes music, dance, drama, comedy, theatre, motion pictures, opera, magic, steel bands and other marching bands.

Letters includes biographies, fiction, non-fiction, history, poetry, plays, choreography, design and musical compositions, conductors, directors, producers, stage and lighting designers, curators and publishers.

Entrepreneurship (introduced in 2015) is a term now commonly applied outside the domains of business and commerce where it originated. In that spirit, the committees will be open to any reasonable adjustment of definitions and criteria if applications and nominees warrant it.

In the most fundamental sense, an entrepreneur is someone able to bring some new, innovative and necessary product to the market—therefore transforming the market, field or area in which the product is embedded and creating a model for replication.

Entrepreneurship is often associated with very big, paradigm-changing products like the mobile phone or personal computer, but the entrepreneurs we expect to find in the Caribbean are innovators on a smaller scale, given the relative dearth of facilities available to undertake such projects.

Public & Civic Contributions include the activities of those who work directly to improve communities and the lives of Caribbean people. The category includes those who have pioneered NGOs and people-centred organisations that benefit their

community, country and region, and better the quality of life for Caribbean people.

The award recognises outstanding work in recreation, youth activities, social welfare, educational issues, domestic violence, drug and substance abuse rehabilitation, health, HIV/AIDS, environmental protection, employment creation, poverty alleviation, service and outstanding contribution to the cause of good governance or civic betterment.

Science & Technology includes research and experimental scientific work in the natural, physical, mathematical, earth, life and biological sciences, as well as applied science to address practical human and community needs. These activities include the science of non-living matter and energy and their interactions including physics, chemistry, geology and astronomy.

Earth Science includes geology, paleontology, oceanography, meteorology and soil sciences.

Life Science includes the field of bioscience and all branches of natural science dealing with the structure and behaviour of living organisms such as plants, animals and humans—including botany, zoology, genetics and medicine.

Technology and Applied Science includes work that uses the outputs of science to create technology that may include the practical application of scientific knowledge to commerce, industry and practical human and community problems. It includes the fields of industrial arts, engineering, agriculture and environmental sciences.

COLLEGE OF LAUREATES

These are our Standing Laureates: 57 Caribbean nationals selected in the fields of Arts & Letters, Entrepreneurship, Public & Civic Contributions and Science & Technology.





COLLEGE OF LAUREATES



2006

Dr Robert Yao Ramesar

(Arts & Letters),

The Very Rev Monsignor Gregory Ramkissoon

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Terrence Forrester

(Science & Technology)

2008

Prof David Dabydeen

(Arts & Letters),

Mrs Claudette Richardson-Pious

(Public & Civic Contributions, Joint),

Mrs Annette Arjoon-Martins

(Public & Civic Contributions, Joint),

Dr James Husbands

(Science & Technology)

2010

Dr Adrian Augier

(Arts & Letters),

Mr Sydney Allicock, MS

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Kathleen Coard, CBE

(Science & Technology)

2011

Dr Kim Johnson

(Arts & Letters),

Prof Surujpal Teelucksingh

(Science & Technology),

Dr Lennox Honychurch

(Public & Civic Contributions)

2012

Mr George Simon

(Arts & Letters),

Dr Paula Lucie-Smith, HBM

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Leonard O'Garro

(Science & Technology)

2013

Prof Caryl Phillips

(Arts & Letters),

Dr Rhonda Maingot

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Dave Chadee,

CMT (Science & Technology, Joint),

Prof Anselm Hennis

(Science & Technology, Joint)

2014

Prof Liam Teague

(Arts & Letters),

Karen De Souza

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Dr Richard Robertson

(Science & Technology)

2015

Prof Paloma Mohamed Martin, AA

(Arts & Letters),

Mr Herbert Samuel

(Entrepreneurship),

Prof Suresh Narine

(Science & Technology, Joint),

Prof Patrick Hosein

(Science & Technology, Joint)

2017

Mr Kwame Ryan

(Arts & Letters, Joint),

Mr Winslow Craig, AA

(Arts & Letters, Joint),

Ms Shadel Nyack Compton

(Entrepreneurship),

Dr Christopher Arif Bulkan

(Public & Civic Contributions)

2018

Dr Kei Miller

(Arts & Letters),

Mr Andrew Boyle, AA

(Entrepreneurship, 2018),

Mrs Chevaughn and Mr Noel Joseph

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Adesh Ramsubhag

(Science & Technology)

2019

Ms Danielle Dieffenthaler

(Arts & Letters),

Ms Kimala Bennett

(Entrepreneurship),

Mr Corey Lane

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Michael Taylor

(Science & Technology),

2020

Mr Jallim Eudovic

(Arts & Letters),

Mr Andrew Mendes

(Entrepreneurship),

Dr Olivene Burke

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Shirin Haque

(Science & Technology)

2021

Ms Maria Nunes

(Arts & Letters, Joint),

Mr Sean Sutherland

(Arts & Letters, Joint),

Dr Guna Muppuri, OD

(Entrepreneurship),

Dr Floyd Morris

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Prof Rupika Delgoda

(Science & Technology, Joint),

Dr Ayanna Carla Phillips-Savage

(Science & Technology, Joint)

2022

Mr Marlon James

(Arts & Letters),

Mr Shyam Nokta

(Entrepreneurship),

Ms Anuskha Sonai, HOYS (Knight)

(Public & Civic Contributions, Joint),

Dr Kim Jebodhsingh

(Public & Civic Contributions, Joint),

Prof Christine Carrington, CMT,

(Science & Technology)

2023

Ms Joanne C. Hillhouse

(Arts & Letters),

Dr Adesh Sirjusingh

(Public & Civic Contributions),

Dr Mahendra Persaud

(Science & Technology)

About the ANSA McAL Foundation and its Board of Directors



THE ANSA McAL FOUNDATION

The ANSA McAL Foundation is the autonomous, philanthropic arm of the ANSA McAL Group. Its major initiative is the funding and administration of the Anthony N Sabga Awards, Caribbean Excellence. Since the first laureates were awarded in 2006, it has supported and recognised 57 exceptional Caribbean laureates with awards of over TT\$28 million.

The Foundation has been committed to addressing a broad range of social needs since inception. It was created by the 1993 merger of the ANSA Foundation, formed in 1986 to assist charitable causes, and the McAL Foundation, formed with similar aims in 1981. In recent times, it has adopted a policy of concentrating on projects of national and regional significance.

Notable achievements include:

- Building the ANSA McAL Psychological Research Centre at UWI, St Augustine.
- Vitas House Hospice, five-year endowment (2012-2016).
- Benefactor of the ANSA McAL wing of the Diagnostic, Research, Education and Therapeutic Centre

for the Hearing Impaired (DRETCHI) for the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Deaf.

- Significant support for The Princess Elizabeth Home for Handicapped Children; SERVOL; the Jaya Lakshmi Children's Home; Junior Achievement of Trinidad and Tobago; The Living Water Community Food Assistance Relief (FAR) Project; the Blood Bank; Trinidad & Tobago Cancer Society and the Lady Hochoy Vocational Centre.
- Founding member of the UWI Institute of Business.

The Foundation is an autonomous body, substantially funded by the ANSA McAL Group. All assistance, however, is funded by the Foundation's own investments.

Board of Directors

Mr Andrew N Sabga (Chairman)
Mr Garth Chatoor
Ms Sharon Christopher, CMT
Dr Terrence Farrell
Mr Nabeel A Hadeed
Ms Amanda Jardine
Mrs Diana Mahabir-Wyatt, MDW, Hon LLD
Rev Fr Ronald Mendes, CSSp
Mr A Nigel Sabga
Mrs Maria Superville-Neilson (Secretary)

To find out more about the Foundation's initiatives or to request assistance, please visit ansamcalfoundation.org

A portrait of Mr. A Norman Sabga, a middle-aged man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera.

Mr A Norman Sabga,

Doctor of Laws, h.c. UWI and UTT

PATRON OF THE AWARDS

Mr A Norman Sabga is Patron of the Anthony N Sabga Awards, Caribbean Excellence and Chairman of the ANSA McAL Group of Companies.

As Chairman of the ANSA McAL Group, he is responsible for overseeing the financial performance of over 75 companies throughout the Caribbean and the United States. He is also responsible for the livelihood and wellbeing of close to 6,000 employees throughout the region. The group's portfolio includes companies in Automotive, Beverage Manufacturing, Chemicals, Construction, Insurance and Financial Services, Media, Real Estate, Retail and Distribution and Shipping.

Mr Sabga, the eldest son of Awards founder Dr Anthony N Sabga, took control of the group as Managing Director in 1996 and was appointed Group Chairman when his father retired in 1999.

He was educated in Trinidad, the United Kingdom and the United States. Upon his return to Trinidad, he joined the

family business at Standard Distributors, where he built a reputation for fairness and a preference for fact-based business discussions. From there, he worked his way through the group, managing various business units and companies.

Mr Sabga is responsible for transforming the ANSA McAL Group, delivering exceptional returns to investors. Under his leadership, the group's share price has increased more than 400 per cent.

For his contributions to business in the region, he was awarded the University of the West Indies Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree (Honoris Causa) in 2015. He also received an Honorary Doctorate (Doctor of Laws) from the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) in 2019.

Mr Norman Sabga takes from his father the firm belief in the pre-eminence of family in shaping and maintaining a stable society. He and his wife, Alma, are the proud parents of five children, four of whom work in the ANSA McAL Group.

DR ANTHONY N SABGA, ORTT



The Founder of the Anthony N Sabga Awards - Caribbean Excellence, Dr Anthony N Sabga began his business life at the tender age of 12 after his father took ill.

From there, he founded his own agency business, selling a range of brands from milk powder to refrigerators. In 1948, he registered a furniture and appliance retailer, Standard Distributors, which became the cornerstone of his empire. In 1986, he greatly expanded his business footprint, acquiring the ailing McAL conglomerate with an innovative share purchase.

In retrospect, his journey may seem certain and inevitable. This was far from the case. He faced many more failures than he ever did successes. But when he succeeded, he did so extravagantly.

It was after his retirement in the early 2000s that he turned his attention to a problem many people spoke of but few knew how to address: regional unity. He believed many stories of achievement and excellence exist in the region, but because of the nature of regional politics and society, they were not being told. His answer to this, after consulting with many friends and associates, was the Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Awards for Excellence, launched in 2005, with its first laureates named in 2006.

The Awards has since named a college of 57 laureates and provided a unique regional platform for cooperation, unity

and fraternity. At the convocation in Guyana in 2017, Mr A Norman Sabga, Dr Sabga's eldest son and successor in his business, and the current patron of these awards, promised they would continue. This is as Dr Anthony N Sabga would have wanted.

Dr Sabga, ORTT, passed away on May 3, 2017, days before the Awards' first ceremony to be held outside of Trinidad & Tobago. During his lifetime, he was recognised as one of the giants of Caribbean achievement and foresight. He was part of the last wave of immigrants to arrive who make up the mosaic that is 21st Century Trinidad and Tobago.

Some of Dr Sabga's Awards and Achievements include:

- Posthumous Lifetime Achievement from the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association Hall of Fame, 2018
- Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce Award for Outstanding Achievement in Business and Contribution towards the Growth and Development of Chaguanas, 2017
- Keys to the City of Port of Spain, 2015
- National Icon of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for outstanding contribution to Trinidad and Tobago in the field of Entrepreneurship, 2013
- Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (ORTT), 2011
- The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce Business Hall of Fame, 2008
- The American Foundation for the UWI for Outstanding Contribution to the Caribbean, 2004
- Prime Minister's Award for Innovation and Invention, Lifetime Achievement Award, Manufacturing Sector, 2004
- Trinidad and Tobago Icons of the Nation in the Category - "Thinkers, Movers and Shapers," 2002
- Ernst & Young Master Entrepreneur of the Year, 1998
- The Chaconia Medal, Gold, 1998
- UWI Doctor of Laws, Honoris Causa, 1998
- Prime Minister's Export Award, 1968