



ISSUE 1 • April 2007

Diana Mahabir-Wyatt: A meaningful life¹

Interviewed by Kimberly Byng

Diana Mahabir-Wyatt was born in Toronto in 1941 but grew up in northern Quebec. Her mother was a teacher of English literature, her father a surgeon. Waves of immigrants from war torn Europe populated the community where she was raised and most of her schoolmates were the children of refugees who migrated to Canada after World War II. From an early age Diana was exposed to people from all over the world and to their vastly different cultures, costumes, languages, religions and ethnic customs, a key experience that prepared her for life in multi-cultural Trinidad.

At the age of 17 she enrolled at McGill University in Montreal where she met her first husband, a Trinidadian. Two years later, although she had not completed her degree, Diana accompanied him on his return home. She became a volunteer at the Lady Hochoy Home for the Handicapped and during this time gave birth to her first two children before returning to McGill University, children in tow, to complete her degree. On her return, Diana first became a supply teacher at St Augustine Girls' High School and later taught in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of the West Indies. During this time she had two more children and started her masters' degree.

Diana took advantage of training provided by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in the development side of industrial relations. In 1964 she became a training and administrative officer at the Employers' Consultative Association. She later became

¹ This scripted interview was reviewed by the interviewee before publication.

Director of the organisation during one of the most difficult times for industrial relations in Trinidad and Tobago's history. She was a member of the tripartite committees that developed the IRA (Industrial Relations Act) and later the National Insurance Act. After the latter was passed, Diana served on the National Insurance Board of Directors for 15 years. She also served on an Advisory Committee to the Minister of Labour and Industrial Relations, while holding down the post of CEO of the Caribbean Employers' Confederation.

Those first years as a key player in business and industrial relations were extremely challenging. Here was a young, white, foreign-born woman in a position of leadership at a time when labour legislation, social security and small business development were new to the region and controlled by men.

Diana also got divorced around this time. She was just 26, with four children to take care of. She would often return home after a demanding day at work and collapse with exhaustion. Without a support network of dedicated housekeepers, pursuing her career and raising her children would have been infinitely more difficult. Diana had worked as a domestic servant, so she knew first-hand that they were often exploited and abused. She treated her housekeepers like family, providing them with training and avenues for improving their education; in return, they took care of her children and her home before moving on to pursue careers and homes of their own abroad.

Diana says she was a feminist from the age of five, when she had to compete with her male classmates and her younger brother for her father's attention. She is a passionate advocate for the rights of women and children. When she had her own radio programme, she focused on how international relations, economics and politics affected women's issues. In the 1970s, she took on the monster of domestic violence, attending conferences and workshops on the issue. Then she became more proactive and founded the Shelter for Battered Women and Children in Port of Spain with the advice and encouragement of Radica Saith who had previously opened the Business and Professional Women's Halfway House in Marabella.

In 1988 both women saw the need for a common forum and began working on a Coalition with other women's groups involved in Domestic Violence. Ten years after its inception, Diana handed the Chairmanship of the Board of Directors of the Port of Spain Shelter to Annette Rahael while she continued to chair the CADV which she continues to do up to today.

Over the years the Coalition against Domestic Violence (CADV) evolved its own programmes, ones that its member organisations did not or could not run themselves. These were programmes that were desperately needed, including "Peace, Love and Understanding in Schools" (PLUS), "Childline" and "Stop Elderly Abuse Now."

For 12 years Diana served as an Independent Senator. She used her position to champion Human Rights issues in Parliament. She instigated and pursued changes in law to industrial relations; equal opportunities for minorities; amendments to the Domestic Violence Act, the Sexual Offences Act, children's legislation and the Cohabitation Act.

Disturbed and bitterly disappointed by the failure of government to protect children by ensuring the implementation of the strong legislation that Parliament had passed in respect of children's rights, Diana resigned from the Senate to work for the implementation of measures to protect children at an NGO level.

But she did not abandon her cause; she accepted a fellowship from Radda Barnen on the Rights of the Child in Sweden and became one of the founding members of the Coalition for the Rights of the Child. She is still disappointed that no structures were put in place for the Children's Authority Bill but it was in the period after she left the Senate that she founded Childline, a counselling hot line for abused children and those at risk, the highly successful schools intervention programme, PLUS to make early childhood education integrated with an anti-violence culture and a programme designed to protect and assist elderly persons who are at risk of abuse, Stop Elderly Abuse Now.

After 35 years of campaigning against domestic violence, Diana has an enormous regard for women and their ability to survive atrocities. She is likewise concerned about the elderly who often receive sub-standard treatment in institutions. She applauds the parenting courses run by Servol,¹ and wishes they had been available to her when she was a young mother.

Her views on corporal punishment in schools are well known as she spoke out strongly against it in the media and at meetings with principals, teachers and parents' groups throughout the country, despite extensive criticism. Eventually the law was changed to forbid corporal punishment of children, at least in schools. Individuals fighting only for political change have not been able to do much in the Caribbean to help women and children, she says. However, pressure on governments from the United Nations and the ILO can bring about change as international organisations now recognise the power of women's NGO's which are usually involved in peace-building activities and, they in turn influence governments to change their policies.

Disillusioned by the abuse of power by those in politics, Diana has now established the Caribbean Centre for Human Rights. She remains the Managing Director of PMSL Caribbean Limited, a management consultancy firm focused on human resource management development. As she grows older, she has turned to meditation and nature for balance in her life and is catching up on quality time with her children and grandchildren.

Her advice to women is to focus on education, as well as develop their emotional and spiritual intelligences so that they become more attuned to others and enable themselves to persevere in leading lives that are meaningful on an integrated level.

¹Servol: Social services and community development organisation that focuses on education, pre-school, technical and post drop-out levels.