

In Memoriam

Sylvia Kaçal,

April 1940 to October, 2003

Last year the environmental movement of Trinidad and Tobago lost one of its most indefatigable champions in Sylvia Kaçal.

In the weeks following her untimely death in Malawi from malaria, Sylvia's many talents were the subject of numerous articles in the press.

They portrayed a multifaceted personality possessed of singular determination and resolve, a dedicated mother, conservationist and friend.

To the students and staff of St. Andrews School, where she taught for so many years, she was "Miss" and a colleague, always finding some innovative approach to the ordinariness of the syllabus.

To the Art fraternity she was a staunch supporter, critic, and familiar figure at shows and galleries, having run her own many years ago from the Hilton Arcade in the hiatus before Art Galleries enjoyed their present prestige.

She was a Founding Member of the British Women's Club, an outgrowth of her characteristic concern for people. Having arrived in Trinidad as a young bride in the early 60's she readily empathized with the isolation often experienced by the families of ex-patriot personnel on contract in those years. The British Women's Club continues to function as a conference where non-nationals can share experiences as they become familiarized with the complexities of Trinidad's diverse culture and customs, and in turn 'put-something-back' through their fund raisers and charities.

To all of us who tramped hillsides and forest trails with her in the Field Naturalists' Club and informal field trips in pursuit of some new information, she was congenial company with whom we could look forward to intelligent and witty conversations. Her natural history interests were varied. She rarely missed a Bird Count, trudged the Aripo Savannah with the Botany Group, and took an active interest in whatever research was current.

She became an active voice against the destructive practices of some of the less ethical Quarry operators, and assisted in designing the early public education programmes for media, on the detrimental consequences of forest fires.

She was a regular columnist with the *Trinidad Guardian* where her Monday articles under 'Environment', were well balanced, often wry and entertaining, as well as informative.

Believing that a pro-active approach to the urgent issues of environmental neglect was necessary, she became a founding member of the Caribbean Forest Conservation Association (CFCA) and its first President. She was also a founder of the Council of Presidents of the Environment (COPE) the 'umbrella organisation' of Environmental Non Governmental Organisations (ENGOS)

She was an immensely pragmatic and resourceful woman who believed there was a simple and elegant solution to every problem once it was approached with a collective will and sufficient objectivity. Many of the projects she initiated are a testimony to this approach, such as The Tour Guide Training Programme, the Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in Kernahan and Surrey Village among others, and the ENGOS, Nature Seekers in Matura,

and the Grand Riviere Environmental Awareness Trust (GREAT) where villagers were trained to care and manage their local natural resources both for conservation and livelihood. These groups, are still actively involved in tour guiding and turtle protection on the nations' beaches.

Her children grown and already in her fifties, she returned to the class room, behind the desk, this time, taking up a scholarship to read for an M.Ph. in Environmental Resource Management at Cave Hill in Barbados. Coming from an academic background in languages this was no mean undertaking, but it gave her the tools to better serve the country of her adoption in an area she perceived both necessary and urgent.

When the CFCA was contracted by the World Bank to develop a plan for National Parks and Protected Areas in Trinidad and Tobago, Sylvia became an important part of the process. Her cumulative experience and reputation for 'getting the job done' later attracted other World Bank assignments in various countries from Vietnam to Malawi where she designed and setup Community Based Organisations in support of Government Environmental initiatives.

In the pauses between contracts and writing new proposals, she would find time to visit the Matura project, or look in on 'the Grand Riviere people', keep in touch with current projects in the Wildlife Section and Forestry Division, attend the Meetings of the Field Naturalists' Club and the CFCA, check out the Art Galleries or the theatre, and spend memorable time with family or friends.

She was no stranger to Carnival and particularly J'ouvert.

Beyond the public face was a loyal and enduring friend, who spoke her mind unequivocally, whose opinion one might get with or without ones leave, and on whose support one could count in any situation. She was an intensely private and unpretentious person who would have been acutely embarrassed by the tributes paid to her at her memorial service. In spite of the many hardships of her own life, she had quietly befriended many, like her longstanding friend, Noel Vaucrosson who she compassionately supported through his terminal illness, and likewise, Jane Boyle from Charlottville.

Most of all Sylvia was an exemplar and left us with a template of constructive action and dedicated service guided by a higher principal than the self-serving model to which we have become accustomed.

Her contribution challenges all of us to move beyond the inertia and procrastination which is at the root of many of the problems influencing declining Environmental health; loss of habitat, and species, and unplanned or uncontrolled development.

A memorial plaque to her work will be placed on the Wall of Remembrance in the Garden of Peace at the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, Port of Spain, by the Field Naturalists' Club and the Caribbean Forest Conservation Association.

Detta van Aardt-Buch