

REFLECTIONS

A woman with a warm smile is the central figure. She wears a vibrant red and white plaid headwrap and a matching short-sleeved top. She is holding a branch with several green avocados. The background is a lush, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees and foliage.

FOURTH QUARTER 1998

**Jamaica's
Senate President
Syringa Marshall-Burnett**

CD, RN, RM, PHN, BScN, MA

**Change
Makers**

Nurses impacting policy

Senator Syringa A. Marshall-Burnett, CD, RN, RM, PHN, BScN, MA

President of the Senate, Jamaica

► In her garden surrounded by avocados, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett takes a moment for a picture prior to the opening of Parliament in 1998. On cultural occasions, she wears Jamaica's national dress of bandana plaid.

Imagining

the worlds we wish for

KINGSTON, Jamaica—Television cameras for the popular news show “Profile” on Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation Television roll on government and health leader Mrs. Syringa Marshall-Burnett in the early 1990s.

With each question the host asks comes one of Mrs. Marshall-Burnett’s artful stories about someone other than herself: Mary Seacole, a pioneer Jamaican nurse; Louise Bennett, a folk artist; her mother, who traveled to England, Cuba and Canada to explore larger worlds than her own.

Mrs. Marshall-Burnett turns attention on rural nurses who need to take part in continuing education studies at urban schools. Being current is imperative, but no temporary housing exists for them. As a result, rural nurses, vital to public health, forfeit their dreams for the caliber of care they wish to give. The host ends the show and quips that this leader has yet to speak of herself, the entire point of the show.

By Hermi H. Hewitt

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: PAMELA MOUGIN



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Soon afterward, an adroit Mrs. Marshall-Burnett, president of the Jamaican Nurses Association and chair of the Department of Advanced Nursing Education at the University of West Indies, Mona, successfully negotiates with the National Housing Trust to obtain low interest loans to erect a hostel for nurses.

On still another TV talk show, "Morning Time," Mrs. Marshall-Burnett tells of an annual nursing research conference. Viewers learn as much about the enormous workloads of nurses in comparison to physicians as they do about research and practices that lead to better care. Can citizens settle for such short shrift?

In a brilliant gusto of work and words, she directs viewers to the greater good. We can improve conditions for women, elderly, children and health for all citizens. Let me count the ways, she considers, with a warmth as effusive as the sun-drenched beaches of her homeland.

It is no wonder that the indefatigable Mrs. Marshall-

Burnett now grasps the anvil of Parliament and hammers out the concerns of the country as president of the Senate of Jamaica, the first nurse to hold the office. She was first elected to the post in 1995 and was re-elected in 1998. She has been a member

of the Joint Select Committee of Parliament that reviews reports from the reform committees and makes decisions on sweeping changes.

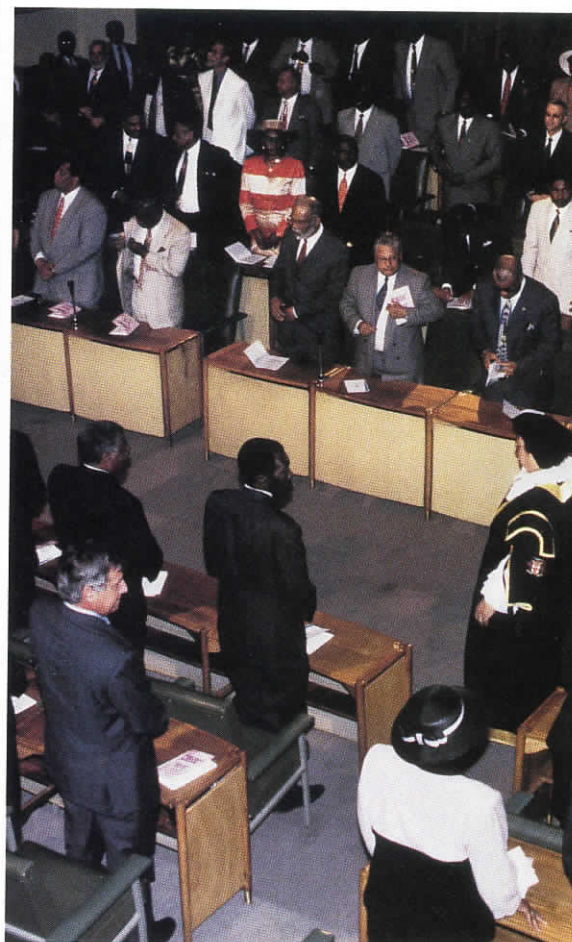
Jamaica, a parliamentary democracy and an independent country, is part of the British Commonwealth. Its prime minister and House of Representatives are elected by the people. After general elections, senators are chosen by the new prime minister and leader of the opposition party. Prime Minister P.J. Patterson—celebrating his third victory—appointed Mrs. Marshall-Burnett again with good reason.

As Senate president, she had already presided over the debate and passage of the Mental Health Act of 1995, replacing the Mental Hospital Act of 1873, archaic by every measure. The old act made provisions for custodial care of

PHOTO BY PAMELA MOUGIN



- ▲ KINGSTON, Jamaica, April 2, 1998—Jamaica's Parliament opens in royal fanfare in British tradition. Senate President Marshall-Burnett follows the mace bearer and will walk to the dais to hand a speech to the governor-general of Jamaica, who represents Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.
- ▶ Senate President Marshall-Burnett is followed by her friend and colleague House Speaker Violet Neilson, right.



the mentally ill and gave police and psychiatrists the power to issue arrest warrants for "lunatic" persons.

The new act blows individual rights and protections to the fore, and primary health care comes of age. It defines the role of the community mental health nurse who cares for mentally ill persons. Nurses hold legal rights to assess, treat, refer and admit mentally ill patients to hospitals. A nurse may conduct family counseling, initiate drug therapy, discharge patients from hospitals and provide follow-up care. With few psychiatrists on the island and none over most of the countryside, nursing's fruits of labor come after decades of unfulfilled wishes.

In 1996, the Ministry of Health asked Mrs. Marshall-Burnett to develop an academic program to introduce mental health nurse practitioners into the health care system. As chair of the university's advanced practice nursing program, she ran with the opportunity. As soon as the curriculum was developed and presented to the Ministry, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett began a program that achieved its first mental health nurse practitioner graduation in 1998.

Mrs. Marshall-Burnett subscribes to the wider definition of health, becoming involved in issues and practical activi-

ties that benefit overall well-being, such as improving living conditions for Jamaicans. To her, housing is an extension of health care and a necessary way to contribute to social justice. She helped formulate a policy and mortgage committee to create a statutory Board of the National Housing Trust. Since its 1976 inception, the trust has provided 57,126 homes with nearly \$14 billion in low-interest loans for residents with low incomes. Five percent of the loans go to people with disabilities. The massive program marks historical redirection and reinvention, each Jamaican hearth a shield against torrential rains and harm.

Mrs. Marshall-Burnett's ideas have been influenced by the leadership of her late parents—her father, Lionel Marshall, a farmer, and her adventurous mother, Mildred Malore Marshall, a nursing assistant and housewife who looked beyond Jamaica's shores for new ideas. As her mother aged and became ill, the senator began to acutely view the needs of all elderly residents.

When possible, older adults are best served when they live amidst family and contribute to the welfare and social development of loved ones, she believes. The roles of community institutions, such as churches, are also critical. Con-

PHOTO BY PAMELA MOUGIN



PHOTO BY THE JAMAICA GLEANER



▲ KINGSTON, Jamaica, July 30, 1998—The United States urged leaders of the Caribbean to encourage Cuban President Fidel Castro to reform his nation and accept democracy. The president visited his democratic neighbors in the Caribbean to finalize free trade agreements. President Castro, left, greets Jamaican Senate President Syringa Marshall-Burnett at Sangster International Airport in Montego Bay.

sequently, a church-based senior citizens home was established in 1989 to help those in the religious community.

Mrs. Marshall-Burnett's national contribution began as far back as clinical practice at the affiliated hospital of her nursing school. She started nursing education in 1953 at the Kingston School of Nursing, formerly Kingston Public Hospital Teaching Department, and was one of the youngest nursing students in her class. She met the qualification requirements for entering nursing school two years prior to the normal age of acceptance.

Following a short stint as staff nurse, she realized that secondary nursing care was not how she wanted to contribute to health. She entered hotel nursing, where maintaining the health of employees and travelers remained vital to Jamaican tourism. This was her opportunity for preventive and promotive health in the top industry.

Her interactions with a wide cross section of world travelers and avid reading motivated her. Fascinated by her mentor and teacher, the late Governor General of Barbados Dame Nita Barrow, who did postgraduate studies at the University of Toronto nursing school, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett decided to embark on studies in Canada also.

Between 1962 and 1967, she attained two certificates—one in nursing service and one in public health nursing—and a baccalaureate nursing degree from the University of

Toronto. She completed a double major at the master's level in education and psychiatric mental health at New York University. While away from Jamaica, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett kept abreast of developments on the island and, from abroad, prepared herself for how she would contribute to nursing when she went home. She took a post at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in 1972.

Amidst social changes, she rekindled work with her nation's professional nursing group, becoming an executive member in 1973. Thereafter, she served as president of the Nurses Association of Jamaica five times between 1973 and 1993. Mrs. Marshall-Burnett found this position vital to opening up new programs in nursing to meet Jamaica's health needs.

She led negotiating teams that effectively sought better conditions of service for nurses. Through her skills at the bargaining table, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett became a beloved household name in Jamaica, and yet a force for which successive governments have had to reckon.

She defied a government order to end a nurses strike while negotiating in 1991. An ex parte summons for injunction was issued for her appearance before the Supreme Court along with members of the negotiating team to answer charges, but she did not flinch. The government quickly acceded to her requests for nurses.

PHOTO BY PAMELA MOUGIN



▲ Mrs. Marshall-Burnett is with her husband Jasper N. Burnett, a chartered accountant, and their daughter Jacquelin, a University of the West Indies social sciences graduate student.

► In her role as senior lecturer and head of the Department of Advanced Nursing Education, Senator Marshall-Burnett is a mentor for nursing students at the University of the West Indies.



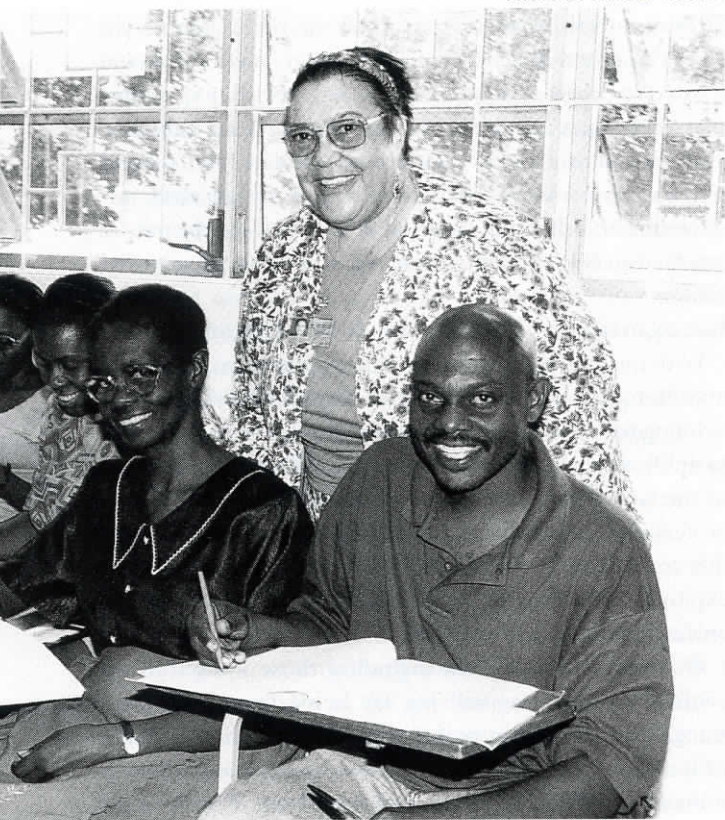
During various negotiating periods, she may be found at the bargaining table with the major trade unionists defending her positions. These experienced men, affiliated with the major political parties, know her as an astute businesswoman. She usually does her strength, weakness, opportunities and threats analysis of opponents prior to negotiating.

Her regional and international leadership responsibilities quickly extended beyond English-speaking Caribbean nations. Aided by a former nursing educator—the legendary late Jamaican nursing leader Gertrude Swaby—Mrs. Marshall-Burnett's prominence rose. Miss Swaby saw talent in the rising young nurse when they participated in the Quadrennial International Council of Nurses Congress in Mexico in 1973.

Miss Swaby introduced Mrs. Marshall-Burnett to the significant arena of nursing publications. Eventually, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett succeeded Miss Swaby as editor of the Nurses Association of Jamaica's journal.

Since that time, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett has participated in all ICN congresses. Consequently, she was elected to the ICN Board of Directors for two quadrennia, representing the board of ICN at the World Health Organization/United Nations International Children Education Fund Primary Health Care Alma Ata Conference

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in 1978. She served also as a resource person for the ICN's and World Health Organization's primary health care workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1979.

In her academic responsibilities at the University of the West Indies, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett introduces international nursing issues. She brings relevant information to her teaching that inspires her students with the notion that they can be change agents.

In 1988, she began the annual nursing research conference in Jamaica to transform nursing research theory into evidenced-based nursing practice. Through her efforts, Caribbean nurses keep abreast of current research and are introduced to international scholars.

The annual conference has become an established calendar date in nursing. Other Caribbean nations have followed suit. A global scientific outlook continues in the region. As a result, an international education conference was held in Jamaica, running parallel to the ICN's and Council of National Representatives' Conference in 1991. Sigma Theta Tau International and the University of the West Indies, Mona, also were co-hosts of a research congress in 1996. Nurse experts from many countries discovered previously unknown Caribbean books and papers that became valued nursing works for the hundreds of scholars who gathered.

In 1993, with the recommendation and support of peers from developing and developed countries, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett ran for president of ICN. Although the primary goal of this effort was not achieved, it led the many nurses who identified with her to aspire to leadership positions themselves within the global environment.

Like the crystal blue waves tumbling over the island's bleached sands, Mrs. Marshall-Burnett's vision pours onto nursing's sanguine shores. As once her student, this writer knows her dynamism and capacity to recall minute details, cross reference information from different disciplines and incorporate the pertinent aspects in nursing issues.

"She who educates for the profession controls the profession," Mrs. Marshall-Burnett says. "Therefore nursing's teachers have to be well-prepared." In Parliament and at the university, her nursing philosophy girds the rounding vessels of confidence plunging into Jamaican-fresh currents. ❀



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