

TRIBUTE TO MADAME JUSTICE DÉsirÉE BERNARD

**CARIBBEAN ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN JUDGES INAUGURAL
CONFERENCE AND PROJECT LAUNCH - 27TH MARCH, 2014**

I consider it a distinct privilege on behalf of the Caribbean Association of Women judges to pay special tribute to Madame Justice Désirée Bernard. You may have heard of her accomplishments many times, but they bear repeating.

A citizen of Guyana, Madame Justice Bernard began her legal career in 1963 when she attained a Bachelor of Laws Degree from the University of London. She qualified as a solicitor in 1964 and engaged in private practice in Guyana from 1965. In 1970, she was appointed a Magistrate; in 1976, a Commissioner of Oaths and Notary Public and she was admitted to the English Roll of Solicitors in 1977.

Madame Justice Bernard has been described as attaining many firsts, blazing a path of glory as the first woman to hold many illustrious positions. In 1980, Justice Bernard was the first woman to be appointed High Court Judge of the Supreme Court of Guyana. In 1992, she was the first woman to be elevated to the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court of Guyana. In 1996, Justice Bernard created history when she became the first woman to be appointed Chief Justice of Guyana. In 2001, she was appointed Chancellor of the Judiciary of Guyana. Indeed in 2005, Madame Justice Bernard became the first and (may I add) the only woman to be appointed a Judge of the Caribbean Court of Justice.

During her long and distinguished career, Madame Justice Bernard served many regional and international organizations and presented many scholarly papers in numerous international seminars and conferences. She received many

awards and accolades. In 2005, Justice Bernard received the Eighth CARICOM Triennial Award for Women.

Regionally, she was the founding Secretary of the Caribbean Women's Association from 1970 to 1974. She was a member and Chair of the Caribbean Steering Committee for Women's Affairs, later established as the Women & Development Unit of University of the West Indies. She was also a member of the Caribbean Council of Legal Education, and President of the Organization of the Commonwealth Caribbean Bar Associations. Justice Bernard was instrumental in the formation of the Guyana Association of Women Lawyers in 1987. She is also a member of the Caribbean Association of Judicial Officers.

Internationally, Madame Justice Bernard served as Rapporteur of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW] from 1982 to 1984. She chaired CEDAW from 1985-1989 and remained a member of CEDAW until 1998. For many years, she was a member of the International Association of Women Judges and served as Vice President of the International Federation of Women Lawyers. Justice Bernard was the first President of the Organization of Commonwealth Bar Associations.

As one considers her many accomplishments, one may ask what factors combined to produce this woman of excellence, humility, decorum and integrity. Justice Bernard herself has given us some clues in the last few months. In an interview with Journalist Yvonne Baboolal published in the Guardian Newspaper on the 5th March, 2014, Justice Bernard spoke openly and eagerly of her deep spirituality. *"I do not do anything in life without prayer," she said. "God has always been my guide and my mentor"*. Indeed, as part of her service to the church, Justice Bernard was the first woman to be Chancellor

of the Anglican Diocese of Guyana (and the first in the Province of the West Indies).

The second clue came in the same interview. Justice Bernard commented:

"I did not set out to be the first of anything. My first concern is whether you are up to the task. The achievement itself is secondary. If honours come after, they come."

An analysis of these clues reveal the following. Justice Désirée Bernard did not set to be the first of anything. She set out with humility to serve the people of Guyana (her beloved nation) and to do her best. When she was appointed to the High Court Bench in 1980, the Judiciary was still a man's world. Justice Bernard, however, allowed no obstacle to stand in her way. She determined to work hard and to excel not simply because she was a woman, but because she was a Caribbean woman who understood the importance of Caribbean women in regional development.

The Caribbean Association of Women Judges pays special tribute to you, Madame Justice Désirée Bernard, for your tireless efforts to ensure the rights of women and girls all over the world and equal access to justice for all people. In particular, we acknowledge your support for this Inaugural Conference and Launch. As you retire, we wish you God's richest blessings and we look forward to your continued involvement in the work and advancement of women judges and women as a whole throughout the Caribbean. **LET US STAND AND SALUTE MADAME JUSTICE DÉSIRÉE BERNARD.**