



My Professional Journey – Motivating the next Generation of Female Leadership

The Honourable Mme Justice Maureen
Rajnauth-Lee, Judge of the Caribbean
Court of Justice

BPTT's International Women's Day Event 2018: "Press for Progress"

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Address

By

The Honourable Mme Justice Maureen Rajnauth-Lee, Judge of the Caribbean Court of Justice,

on the occasion of

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Theme: Press for Progress

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Good morning to all. Thanks to our chair for her kind words of welcome. Allow me to say that it is wonderful to be back at BPTT. I have heard about oil and gas all my life, having been married to an AMOCO/BP husband since 1975.

Special greetings from the President, Judges and staff of the Caribbean Court of Justice, also known as the CCJ. The CCJ has replaced the Privy Council in four countries of the Caribbean – Barbados, Belize, Dominica, and Guyana. For those four countries, we are the final court of appeal. The CCJ also enjoys an original jurisdiction where we determine disputes which arise under the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas e.g. trade disputes between manufacturers or importers and governments. All countries which have signed on and ratified the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas access the CCJ under its original jurisdiction. That includes Trinidad and Tobago.

I have been asked to share with you a bit of my professional journey. My professional journey started at Woodbrook Government Secondary School. At Woodbrook Sec, I met teachers and staff who were interested in our daily lives and in our progress as students. Gladly, I understand that the teachers at Woodbrook Sec are the same today. Life at Woodbrook Sec was full of fun. We enjoyed sports like netball and hockey. We loved our teachers and they loved us. I lived in Woodbrook, so I went home for lunch each day. In those days, Woodbrook was a residential area which was safe for walking all hours of day and night.

From Woodbrook Sec I moved onto Bishops Anstey High School to do my Advanced Levels. Once more, I can say, that life at Bishops was great – fun, friends, and fellowship. And of course, lots of work. But the focus was not just on working hard, but Bishops focused on the development of character. The aim of our Principal and teachers at Bishops was that we should be a great asset to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Question: Before I go on, let me ask this question: How many of you have already decided what career you wish to pursue?

Going back to my journey. It was at Bishops that I had convinced myself that I should study law. Career Day arrived and my mother and I went to discuss with the Principal what career I wanted to pursue. The Principal asked my mother “What does Maureen want to study”. My mother said frankly “I have no idea; Ask her.” Of course, I remember sitting a little way off from the principal and my mother. I was asked the dreaded question. Now, you have to understand that I was a quiet child. In a small voice and with no confidence in what I was saying, I answered: “I want to do law”. I was asked to repeat myself and I did. “I want to do law, I said. “Law!” The Principal boomed. “Do not do law, Maureen. You will starve”, she warned me sternly. Well, I did law, and you know something, I did not starve. I figured out much, much later in life that the principal was not trying to discourage me from doing law. She was challenging me to prove her wrong. And I did.

I studied law at the University of the West Indies and then at the Hugh Wooding Law School. I spent 2 years in Barbados and 3 years in Trinidad – 5 years in all. Studying law was interesting and challenging. There was never a dull moment. I enjoyed it. But there was a major distraction. In between my studies, I got married. By the time I had finished my studies and started my new job, I had 3 children. The last one is here this morning.

After my studies, I started to work at the Chambers of the Attorney General. I spent almost 5 years there and during that time I had a desire to become my own boss and run my own business. I went into private practice, working with two other women lawyers. We did a lot of corporate law, family law, industrial law, tax law, land law. In 2001, I was appointed a Judge of the High Court of Trinidad and Tobago. I sat in the Family Court when it was established in 2004 for about 18 months. I returned to the High Court until 2012 when I was elevated to the Court of Appeal. I am

still a Judge today, but as you have heard, I am now the only woman Judge at the CCJ. I was sworn in as a Judge of the CCJ 3 years ago.

This invitation to speak to you caused me to reflect on my 17 years working as a Judge. What did I learn? I believe that I have learnt 3 important lessons during these 17 years:

(1) **The first and most important, is that whatever we do in life, we must put people first.**

I was speaking to someone who has spent a lot of her life living and working in New York. We were speaking about the importance of building a culture among our people of service to country and people first. She mentioned that the brightest and best law students in New York, after graduation, often looked for jobs, not just to earn a big salary, but jobs where they could help the poor and those, whom they thought, were being taken advantage of by agencies of the State. An example would be someone who had been falsely accused of murder and had been in prison for life many years ago. But what does putting people first mean?

Question: What does putting people first mean to you?

To me it meant, seeing my role of the judge as one where I helped people solve some very serious problems. I did not see files, but I saw people, some very hurt and damaged people. I listened to their stories because that is what court files are. I did everything within my power to help people come to a better place than where I met them. To get a resolution of their matters which would enable them to carry on with the rest of their lives.

(2) Second, I learnt that **I must never stop learning**. One of my favourite books is “Rookie Smarts – Why Learning Beats Knowing in the New Game of Work” by Liz Wiseman, a woman author. Liz writes to most of us in this room and encourages us to never stop learning. She writes:

“For experienced, midcareer professionals exhausted from climbing a career ladder or just stuck on a learning plateau feeling bored, this book offers renewal. For those who wonder if younger upstarts will upend their careers... this book offers a competitive edge. If you are stuck climbing your way up a corporation, it might be time to get off the career ladder

and get onto a learning curve. The ladder leads to stagnation while the learning curve promises renewal, both for you and the corporation.”

For me at the CCJ, it has been a steep learning curve and I am enjoying every moment!

- (3) Third, I learnt that my life was not just about my career. I have heard this referred to as Work-Life Balance. 3 Little Words had huge significance to me – **Family, Friends and Faith**. Family - Giving priority to my family, my husband and children, my parents, my late brother, and his family. I am now a grandparent. It is important to me to spend time with my grandchildren and enjoy them. Friendships - Maintaining friendships over the years. Being there for my friends as they face serious challenges. Sitting in hospital rooms with some of them. Or being there when their children get married. And of course, my Faith. Anyone who knows me well, knows that above all, my love for my Lord, or better said: “His love for me” has been my constant guide. The Holy Book that I read encourages me that whatever I do, I must do it as unto the Lord.

SEXUAL OFFENCES PROJECT:

I would appreciate if you would allow me some time to speak briefly about a project at the CCJ which is very important to me. I am Chair of an Advisory Committee comprising judicial officers, academics and gender specialists from all over the Caribbean. Our aim is to change how sexual offences are dealt with by the courts, by law enforcement and by doctors in the Caribbean. We have been looking at matters such as the under-reporting of sexual assaults and why more than one half, or almost two thirds of sexual assaults are not reported. Why do women stay silent for so long after a sexual assault? What is consent? And what is not? This project seeks to focus on how sexual offences should be dealt with in our courts so that those who survive sexual offences (and we refer to them not as victims but as survivors) will be treated with dignity as they report at the police station. Survivors tell us that they feel as if they are being treated like criminals by the police and are being interrogated instead of interviewed; no doubt because of old stereotypes that women and girls are likely to tell lies about sex. How are survivors treated when they are taken to the hospital for the forensic examination? When they seek justice in the courts. As we do this

work, we bear in mind that we must ensure that the trial process remains fair for both defendant and survivor.

Let me highlight one aspect of our work in sexual offences. Why is there so much under-reporting and why do women choose to come forward after such a long period of silence? There are so many reasons. Survivors may have been children when they were assaulted, and some don't understand what has happened to them. Some survivors may have been threatened that they would be assaulted again or hurt or killed if they came forward. Some young survivors have no family support, especially if the perpetrator is Mummy's partner. Some persons have no faith in the justice system; they may have heard how long matters take to be tried in court. Or perhaps, they feel that they would not be believed because of who the perpetrator is or who they are. They may feel that because of their lack of standing in society or lack of education, no one will care. As one woman giving evidence in court in one of our Caribbean countries said to the Judge: "Judge, I easy to rape." No one cares, was her message. Many persons endure sexual abuse and stay quiet. Some never tell anyone or only feel able to do so when there is some trigger in their own lives which causes them to open up. For others, there has to be a change in our culture, so that they can feel safe and feel that people do care and that they will be believed. Movements like the #MeToo movement have given many survivors that courage and hope.

This is hard but important work, specially to protect the welfare of our women and children, who are the majority of survivors of sexual abuse. I count myself privileged to be a part of it.

IN CLOSING, I don't know about you, but I am a huge tennis fan. I can't hit a tennis ball to save my life, but I love to watch tennis. My husband and I follow every tennis tournament on television. We were able to tick off something on our bucket list: Seeing Roger Federer play at night at the U. S. Open in New York. My favourite players are Roger Federer and Serena Williams. Serena was being interviewed before a big match and was asked what was the key to her being successful in this match, because her opponent was a great player. I will never forget Serena's answer. She said words, to this effect: "I just have to focus on my own game". So, when I was asked by those who so kindly invited me this morning, how did I manage to succeed in a man's world, I simply answer. "Like Serena, I focus on my own game."