

# PROFILE of The Week

By Dr. DHANPAUL NARINE

## Justice Desiree Bernard: Blazing a Trail!

She has been described as a Slady 'of firsts' and her stellar achievements bear this out. Justice Desiree Bernard is the first woman Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Guyana and the first woman Justice of the Court of Appeal.

She was also the first woman Justice of Guyana and the Commonwealth. In 2001, she became Chancellor and Head of the Judiciary and in 2005 she joined the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) as the only woman Judge. The CCJ is the highest Court of Appeal in the Caribbean.

Justice Desiree Bernard was born in Third Street, Alberttown in Georgetown, Guyana. Her mom was Maude and her dad was William Bernard from Plaisance; he was a former Sergeant of Police. Desiree is the only child. She has a daughter Carol who practices Law in Trinidad and Tobago.

Desiree attended St. Ambrose School in Georgetown, and later went to schools in Suddie and Albion before settling in Plaisance. Desiree was a bright student. She passed the entrance exams and was awarded a place at Bishops High School. She spent seven happy years there completing her Ordinary and Advanced Level exams. Desiree wanted to teach but a friend advised her to do Law. She joined a legal firm that was headed by Fred Wills where she gained valuable experience.

Desiree found that she had a talent for the Law and she was able to complete her Bachelor of Laws degree. She then went to England in 1962 and furthered

her studies at Grays Inn in London. Desiree returned to Guyana in 1964 as a qualified Solicitor and joined Cameron and Shepherd a year later.

One day while she was in Court she met an attorney who was leaving for Canada.



**Justice Desiree Bernard is one of the finest legal minds in the Caribbean and a champion for gender equality.**

He wanted to know whether Desiree would take over his practice. She agreed and continued to distinguish herself in her profession. Desiree's talent caught the attention of the then Chancellor of the Judiciary William Crane. In 1980, history was created when she was appointed as the first woman Judge in Guyana.

How did she find it? She said it was quite an event as many women organizations turned up to give her support.

Desiree continued to distinguish herself. In 1992, she was appointed to the Guyana Court of Appeal. When it came time to appoint a Chief Justice of Guyana Desiree's name was high on the list.

Desiree was not only the Chief Justice but later became the Chancellor and Head of the Judiciary of Guyana which was an amazing achievement. The Caribbean Court of Justice came into

Law, she was actively involved in women's affairs. The United Nations had established a committee to eliminate discrimination against

Caribbean Community Triennial Award for enhancing the affairs of women. Two years later, she received another prestigious award.

Desiree says that, 'Carol is far brighter than me. She is good at whatever she does. She is an avid reader.' Carol says that her mom is 'very stable in her reactions. She is always impartial. She is a deeply religious person and she respects others and their beliefs.'

Desiree has deep admiration for Fred Wills who started her on the path in Law and she credits her parents Maude and William Bernard for instilling in her integrity, fair play and honesty. She says,

'I am very particular about integrity and honesty. All judges should have independence and I will not entertain any person, government or otherwise, interfering in my decisions.' She ruled that Janet Jagan had the constitutional right to be President after the 1997 elections were challenged in the courts.

Desiree exhorts the leaders of Guyana to spend the oil and gas revenues wisely for the benefit of the nation. Investing in education is a worthwhile venture and children need to grow up with good and strong moral values and to read more. Justice Desiree Bernard has led an exemplary life. She is one of the finest legal minds in the Caribbean. She has blazed many trails and her counsel continues to enlighten.

We wish Justice Desiree Bernard and her family all the best in the future.



**Justice Bernard receives her award for exemplary service from the Guyana-Jamaica Friendship Association.**

women.

Desiree was invited to become a member of the Committee and 23 experts worldwide would meet and discuss ways and means to eliminate discrimination.

Her tenure in the Caribbean Court of Appeal has seen her addressing groups on matters that are relevant to the Caribbean Community. One such topic was the Caribbean Community Single Market. There is no doubt that living in the Caribbean has given her a better appreciation of the diversity of the region.

Desiree is not only a distinguished legal luminary. She has written on matters relating to the rights of women and children and she is well respected in the international community on gender issues. The seven judges on the CCJ are from different parts of the region and this sets a good example for impartiality.

Over the years Desiree has won many awards and prizes. In 2005, she received the

Desiree was honored by the University of the West Indies with the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. This was a most fitting recognition and richly deserved award to one of the most distinguished women of the Caribbean. In October 2017, Desiree traveled to New York, where she was honored by the Guyana-Jamaica Friendship Association.

Desiree has a talent for academia and research too. In 2013, she completed research on the Compatibility of the Caribbean Court of Justice with the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas. This was done under a fellowship offered by the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in London.

Desiree is optimistic about the future. She sees herself being involved in the Law and is willing to share her knowledge with young attorneys. She is heartened to see an increase in women attorneys in the region. Her daughter Carol is an attorney.