

The Lady and the Library

Island Scholar brings Literature to Life

by Michael Kaduck

A flamboyant tree shelters a memorial to ancient wars in a quiet town square. Yet the conflict seems far removed from this tranquil place. For this is Nevis, and life is easy.

On the edge of the square, a “found stone” structure, steeped in history, echoes with the tolling hours from an Edwardian clock tower. The Court House on Memorial Square is a building of modern government, to be sure, but it is also the court where Admiral Horatio Nelson had his terrestrial comeuppance. Having raided four American merchant vessels in 1785, Nelson was tried in Nevis and fined the impossible sum of £40,000, forcing him to hide out on his ship for many gruelling weeks. He did find a bride in Nevis, and was eventually exonerated, so that story ended in true tropical adventure style.

Above the Court House is a room with a wooden beam roof reminiscent of a ship’s keel. The Executive Council of colonial Nevis met here in years gone by. Today, it houses the Nevis Public Library: the “people’s university” which helps sustain the educational and intellectual life of the twin-island Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis.

The architect of the Library’s role in the community – chief librarian Sonita Daniel – made her mark early as a Canada-CARICOM Scholar. Having earned exceptional grades and demonstrated special potential at the University of the West Indies, Sonita accepted a scholarship to attend Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. There she received her Master of Public Administration, and returned to her native Nevis to put her advanced education to work. For good.

On the occasion of a recent donation of Canadian literature to the Library by the Canadian High Commission, Sonita noted that the Library was “*working to promote a culture of reading in the society.*” She later added: “*Reading is the mother of all subjects.*”

Sonita has shaken off the stoic, shushing stereotype of the library matron, and injected new energy and distinction into her profession. The purpose of a library is to develop culture, achievement and citizenship through reading, so the promotion of reading is her primary task. Sonita takes on this role with the zeal of a missionary.



The Court House, Nevis



The Lady in the Library

History matters a great deal in how modern society unfolds. The Nevisian librarian describes a situation where Caribbean states have high rates of literacy, but have tended historically to be oral societies. The great challenge for the lady and the library is to turn children and their parents on to reading, when there are so many compelling distractions, electronic and otherwise.

Quality literature that is culturally relevant, taught with enthusiasm and sensitivity, will challenge readers. Sonita's approach wins converts to reading by capturing kids early and sustaining their participation through variety, action, and community awareness.

"You have to start early, even before a child can walk," says Sonita, "Get the child involved in the stories as they unfold."

The Library's after-school reading groups are advertised on radio and in schools, churches and

daycare centres. Mrs. Vernie Amory, spouse of the Premier of Nevis, often brings her guitar to reading sessions, leading children in song and rhyme. Summer programmes promote environmental and community awareness. Drama, drawing and other muses help students identify meaning in the written word and their place in the written world.

Nevis was once known as "Queen of the Caribbees" and in Nelson's day was a key point on trans-Atlantic trade routes. Life is easy in Nevis, but the island's future as a destination for tourism, financial services and global commerce will depend on the intellect and ingenuity of its people.

Nevis knows this. Sonita shows this. And the "people's university" is open for business

