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A house for Mr Boogsie

PAN composer, arranger and player Len "Boogsie" Sharpe was reported to be overcome with emotion last Friday at the news that for his contribution to pan in Tobago he was to be given a house by the Tobago House of Assembly.

Not the least of these emotions was surprise. Mr Sharpe said that when he received his invitation to Friday's opening ceremony of the Tobago Heritage Festival, he assumed he had been invited either to perform or to receive an award.

But a house is a mark of recognition on an altogether different scale. Mr Sharpe has Tobago connections – he is the nephew of Winston Bailey, the calypsonian Shadow, who was also honoured on Friday, though less substantially. But Mr Sharpe is best known for his long association with the Woodbrook steelband, Phase II.

It also comes as a surprise to learn that the Tobago House of Assembly is in so sound a financial position that it is able to give gifts on such a scale.

National Award

But the generosity of the Tobago House of Assembly sprang from a widely shared belief that for those citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who have greatly distinguished themselves, who have brought honour to the nation or who have made outstanding contributions to the national community, a medal is not enough. At present, however, the only formal national recognition of such individuals is the bestowing of a national award which consists of just that. To win a national award is still considered an honour, but in recent years some of those so honoured have been given larger tokens of the nation's esteem.

In June 1995, for instance, Prime Minister Patrick Manning presented Brian Lara with the deed to a piece of land as a tribute to his 375-run Test match record, set the pre-

vious year. As was noted at the time, this was more than had been given to sprinter Hasely Crawford, who had won this country's only Olympic gold medal in 1976. It was not until 1997 that Crawford was presented by Prime Minister Basdeo Panday with the keys to a house in Federation Park.

Of course, it is not only our sporting champions who deserve such recognition and support. In 1996, the Ministry of Social Development was approached by citizens seeking financial assistance for Beryl McBurnie.

Draft Policy

Half a century ago, McBurnie, now in her eighties, gave up a promising career in the US to devote the best years of her life to the task of researching, preserving and resurrecting local folk dance, for which she has received much praise but no financial reward. The theatre she founded, the Little Carib, which will forever be a memorial to McBurnie's pioneering work, is also in dire straits.

It comes as welcome news, therefore, to see that the Ministry of Social and Community Development has just issued a draft policy on national heroes and other "special achievers", together with draft guidelines on assisting needy citizens who have contributed to the national good. The interministerial committee which produced the document rightly notes: "The need to develop some consistency in the manner in which persons who have excelled nationally, regionally and internationally are recognised remains urgent. In most instances, recognition has been spontaneous and ad hoc."

The impulse to acknowledge and reward those who have thus distinguished themselves is a noble and generous one. But to ensure against prejudice, unfairness, arbitrariness and neglect, this urge must be channelled and standardised.