

Gallery

People * Art * Life * Style

Jeanine Remy

leads Sforzata to pan victory

By CAROL MATROO

DR JEANINE REMY sold her home, gave up a tenured teaching job and surrendered a hefty salary cut, all for the love of pan.

She packed up her family and her instruments, left Wisconsin in the United States, and has made Trinidad her home for the past ten years.

Remy is fresh from a victorious win with Sforzata claiming the Pan in the 21st Century title, the competition which was held at Jean Pierre Complex, Wrightson Road in Port-of-Spain, last Saturday. The 48-year-old Remy spoke with the *Sunday Newsday* about her introduction and love affair with the steelpan.

Originally from Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, Remy who has all her degrees in music and is a tenured professor of music, first heard the steel pan when composer Al O'Connor took the national instrument to Wisconsin.

"I was living in Wisconsin and Northern Illinois is right under Wisconsin and this man came with a U-haul and he happened to bring steel pans along. I heard it and I participated in the ensemble and I followed him right back to Illinois. I was going to a music conservatory at the time.

"I transferred to Northern Illinois University (NIU) and I lost lots of credit. It took me five years to get my undergraduate degree because the credits didn't transfer, but I just fell in love with the instrument," Remy said with a laugh as she patted her dogs at her home in Valsayn.

A percussionist, Remy explained that the steel pan fell into the category of percussion instruments, which included drums, xylophone and piano, which she started playing at age seven.

Back in the sixth grade in the US, students were allowed to choose any instrument they wanted to play. For Remy, it was the drums.

"They wanted to put me on flute or oboe or something like that and I said I wanted to play that, and I pointed to the snare drum. They said no you can't do that. I asked why not and they said girls don't play that. I said okay, that's the



DR JEANINE REMY fell in love with the national instrument, the steelpan, the first time she heard the beautiful notes come from a steel drum. PHOTO BY ROGER JACOB

instrument I want to play. My uncle also had a drum set so I used to diddle around with that. It was something I was always interested in," she said.

After attending NIU, Remy went to the University of Arizona to get her doctorate, which would then make her marketable to get college teaching jobs.

Her first trip to Trinidad was in 1989 when she was working on her doctorate, at which time Remy began playing with Invaders steelband. While doing her research at the library of the University of the West Indies, her field research was done in the pan yard.

"Being at the university and teaching, Carnival time is never a good time because it's not during spring break and it never seems to

fit so you have to write grants, explain what it is you want to do. I liked it, I fell in love with it and I came back for many years for Carnival as possible, writing grants, and finally there was the grandfather of all grants, the Fulbright. I got a Fulbright to teach here at UWI in 2000. I was lecturing at UWI and doing my research at Invaders pan yard.

"I was on my sabbatical away from Idaho State University (ISU). I had left my job because I was allowed a year for my sabbatical. In teaching most people take their sabbatical to go and do something fun, and this was fun for me so I ended up coming here.

After teaching at UWI for one year, Remy returned to ISU and taught for two more years until a

job in musicology opened up in Trinidad in 2003.

"I taught at the University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh for two years in the early 90s then I moved to Idaho State University where I taught for 13 years. I was a professor of music at these places, but always finding every excuse to come to Trinidad. I gave up everything. I sold my house, I sold everything. I had my furniture on the lawn. The only thing I saved were all my percussion instruments.

"It was not a difficult decision to make. Yes, Trinidad is full of crime and it has lots of problems and people were asking me, 'Why are you leaving?' I had a tenured position, they couldn't fire me. I was a tenured full professor, but I said life is too short, you gotta do what you want to do and I really loved the pan so much...in between I was conducting for festivals but after the Fulbright what is there? There is no other excuse to come back, so I decided to just move down here," Remy said.

And the steel pan was not the only thing she found and fell in love with in Trinidad. Remy met her husband, Stefon, at Invaders' pan yard in 1989. He relocated to Idaho with Remy after they were married and after their two sons — Shea, nine, and Seth, 13 — were born, he was reluctant to return to Trinidad.

"I had to adapt. Then we had to suffer through the SEA (Secondary Entrance Assessment) with Seth because when we came here he was six and he was two years behind your school system. Your four-year-olds were learning how to read so I held him back for a couple of years and he did his SEA this year. My other son was just two when we came here, just a baby, so he adapted. "It was a big change, it was a huge salary cut, but it's my love and my passion. I don't regret anything. I think being happy is not about having a lot of money. It's nice to be comfortable, but I'm humble and I am not egotistical and I like to share the good glory. It's not just me who won this thing. It's all my players and the management and the pan tuners and I had three wonderful drillers," Remy said.

Her biggest fear, she says, was

learning to drive on the left side of the road.

And while her family supported the move, her colleagues thought she had lost her mind.

"They said there were enough arrangers in Trinidad, why did I want to be one more. I said because that is what I want to do, why can't I try? I said it never hurts to try and follow your dreams. I had some disappointments, but I had some real fun too," she admitted.

However, Remy confided that it has not been an easy road for her.

"Trying to break into the arena of steel pan is not easy, especially being a woman and a foreigner because you had to pay your dues, and I've been paying my dues for a good ten years now, even before that, it's 20 years of paying my dues from 1989 to 2010," she said.

Remy has been arranging for steelbands and playing the steelpan since 1984, which is part of her job at UWI's Department of Creative and Festival Arts, including lecturing on the steelpan industry and development and steelpan literature. Winning has a certain rush, but Remy said that was not what it was all about.

"It is about putting down music and being different," she said.

Remy said there were more women arrangers on the scene today, and more women were also playing the steelpan.

"When I first started with Invaders in 1989 there were five of us and now when you look at any band there are more women than there are men. They are young and they are getting into pannist schools and learning to read (music) and the quality of their skills is much better," she said.

Why are we seeing this change? Remy said there was more acceptance of the steelpan. She said because pan yards were seen as "rough", parents refused to send their daughters to these areas.

"But I think they're realising that they're getting it at school. Some of the parents are seeing it as okay and the Government supports it. Pan yards now have rules. There is no smoking, no drinking, no drugs, no foul language, rehearsal would start pretty much on time and end at 10 pm, they're not this all night kind of thing."