



The University of the West Indies

MRS. THALIA GERALDINE LYN, O.D.

Degree of Doctor of Laws (LLD)

Chancellor, to be in the presence of our honorary graduand is to find oneself basking in the radiance of her smile, which is pure sunshine! Her *joie de vivre* is unparalleled, her energy is infectious and, if you are not careful, Chancellor, soon that mischievous twinkle in her eyes will lead to some kind of “autoclaps,” if not a new business venture or adventure. She must have been a force of nature in her infancy because she recalls her childhood as a tale of tumbles: she fell down the stairs of her grandparents’ house, she fell out of a black mango tree in her front yard, she fell out of a car en route to the Mineral Baths, and she fell out of the Nanny’s hands, losing two of her front teeth. From age three to seven, she recalls smiling with her mouth shut, even as she continued to embrace life with open arms. What we will hear today in a review of a phenomenal life is of an open-hearted woman of daring, who engages in energetic pursuit of life’s opportunities, who is never afraid of calculated risks! Chancellor, I present to you: business woman, Founder, Chief Executive Officer & Managing Director of Island Grill, Chairman of N.C.B. Foundation, stockbroker, Marketing Manager, board director extraordinaire, Inductee in the PSOJ Hall of Fame, a restorer of sacred murals and preserver of heritage sites, philanthropist, Justice of the Peace, Honorary Counsel General of Thailand, Mrs. Thalia Lyn.

Notwithstanding her early life of unexpected escapades threatening life and limb, she had a charmed childhood. Born in 1946, the second of Gladstone and Maisie Chang's 7 children, plus 5 adopted cousins, who lost their parents in an accident, Thalia had playmates galore (8 other girls and 3 boys). By the time they moved to Barbican, their parents settled on Roselle Street alongside other siblings and the paternal grandparents and so created a whole community of Changs to make up their own proverbial village of caregivers for these children. She remembers an active time during those formative years of playing cricket and marbles, dressing up and participating in pageants, careening down driveways on wagons and making trips to the beach; she had innumerable family activities to keep her busy. Yet, her parents, especially the patriarch, insisted that they remember their humble beginnings. They learnt the genesis of the family-business: the story of how a "pardner draw," proceeds from the sale of their mother's barley sugar and a loan from an elder provided the deposit to purchase Valentine Bakery (now Purity Bakery). Like Shakespeare's King Lear, Queen Lyn learnt from early to remember her humble family past, so that she would be mindful of those "houseless heads" and "unfed sides" of the needy, so that those who have a-plenty "mayst shake the superflux to them,/and show the heavens more just." Daddy Chang also emphasized not forgetting those who helped you along the way and recognizing the value of a good education.

With such encouragement, young Thalia took to her studies with zeal, focus and sometimes with a little more squirming enthusiasm than the Nuns could manage. She squirmed through Kindergarten in a beret at Alpha, then in a Jippa Jappa hat at Immaculate Preparatory School and, although being at the top of her class and passing the Common Entrance Examinations at age 9, she was kept back from entering Immaculate Conception High School, until she was 10. There, she completed her Senior Cambridge Examinations at age 15, then her Higher Schools 2 years later. During high school, she was Class Prefect, sang in the Glee Club, acted in school plays and became a Girl Guide. Since the Chang boys were slated for the family business, the young girls knew that they needed a degree in order to be self-reliant. At 17, she won a scholarship to Manhattanville College, in New York, where she completed in 2 ½ years her 4-year BA degree in English. Having witnessed first-hand the activities of the Civil Rights Movement, Thalia returned to Jamaica and to her high school beau a more self-aware and socially

conscious person. After a year teaching English at Immaculate and attaining the age of 21, she married Michael Lyn, with whom she has spent the last 52 years of her life.

They migrated to Canada where his flying career would take wings and, in between having her two sons, she qualified to be a Financial Advisor and Stockbroker and then became the Marketing Manager for one of the largest Canadian companies in Mutual Funds. When Air Jamaica provided an opportunity for her husband, they moved back to Jamaica and Thalia continued to sell mutual funds, while keeping an eye out for new business opportunities. In true Jamaican-Chinese tradition, she had her informal “internship” in the family business during her holidays or on evenings awaiting the ride home; business was in her blood. The first opportunity was Dairy Castle, selling soft-serve ice cream, but by the time the second store was opened, hamburgers and fried chicken were added to the menu. Then they opened Char Grill, replacing a former KFC franchise in Twin Gates Plaza, which then became Chicken Supreme. After dispensing with the ice cream and the fried chicken, thus focussing on grilling, and after beginning to add Jamaican spices to the chicken, the concept of Island Grill was born. Founded in 1991, this iconic Jamaican brand has grown to 19 outlets, including one in Barbados and even venturing to Florida for a spell; that chain of restaurants is now a billion dollar enterprise. Even more remarkable, Chancellor, is that its enviable accomplishment is that we can now have the words “home-cooked meal and fast food” in the same sentence, if not the same mouth, without fear of colic or contradiction! Promoting healthy living and eco-friendly principles, Thalia Lyn’s Island Grill, with its “Eat Good, Live Good” mantra, has become a remarkable sensation. Accompanying their eat right/live right philosophy is their philanthropy—the support of numerous community and charitable activities, such as the Supaah Pot of Love and other outreach programmes.

Indeed, Chancellor, philanthropy is part of her heart beat, part of her heritage. She is the Chair of The NCB Foundation, which has awarded over approximately JA \$2 billion in awards to education and youth development. In 2012, Mrs. Lyn, as co-chair fund raiser, committed Island Grille’s support and formed a coalition of sponsors from the business, media and Diplomatic communities to The UWI/CB Group 5K and Smart Eggs Kids K. Since the inaugural initiative, over 250 scholarships valued at JA \$75 million have been awarded. This phenomenal woman-entrepreneur, Chancellor, has been recognized with the Humanitarian Award of the American Friends of Jamaica, been twice named Business Leader of the Year by the Florida International University MBA graduating Classes, been

recently inducted in the PSOJ Hall of fame as only the second woman been given this honour, been awarded the Order of Distinction and, further afield, been bestowed with The Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand. She ruefully reminds us that unlike her other siblings and cousins who had a pastry named after them, her name Thalia, was too unusual be dignified as a delicacy. That name of Greek origin which means giver of grace and charm, should be elevated beyond pastry to Pelican Pride, and so, by the power vested in you by the Council and Senate of The University of the West Indies, Chancellor, for entrepreneurship, confer on Mrs Thalia Geraldine Lyn the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

Mona Campus
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