



Bert Norman Mitchell

Once upon a time, Chancellor, before the compact disc and “dot com” and e-commerce and globalisation and the Spice Girls, there was a boy named Bert. His heritage was humble, but his childhood was happy. He lived on a small farm where there was no electricity and no running water, and he had to walk three miles to school over unpaved roads.

It is perhaps a reflection of the optimism and idealism of his Manchester country folk that the school, the Porus Primary School, was known to everyone in the area as Arcadia, which is the name of a mythical, rustic paradise. And in this New World Arkady not one, but two fairy godmothers watched over him, in the persons of Mrs Rose Thomas and Mrs Ivy Seivwright, who taught him when he was nine or ten years old. They built on the foundation that his mother, a woman of strong character, had already laid. Mrs Thomas, “Sweet Rose,” was most particular about the importance of good manners, and Mrs Seivwright, “Miss Ivy,” was the symbol and martinet of excellence. That is why, for the last thirty years, her former student has funded the Ivy Seivwright Award for Excellence at Porus Primary School.

Chancellor, this is no fairy story. It is a story of substance, in proof of which I present a man of most excellent substance, Bert N. Mitchell, founder, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Mitchell & Titus, Certified Public Accountants, one of the 100 largest CPA firms in the USA, and that nation’s largest minority-owned CPA firm. It is not just a matter of size. Bert’s work at Mitchell & Titus has been distinguished by and publicly recognised for the quality of his performance and leadership. For example, in 1996 he received the Gold Medal for Distinguished Service awarded by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, the highest recognition one can achieve in the accounting profession in the United States. It is awarded each year to one or two individuals, and Bert Mitchell is the only African-American to have achieved it. Almost a decade before that, in 1987, he was elected President of the New York State Society of CPA’s, becoming the first African-American to head a State Society. His partner Bob Titus considers himself privileged to have had “a 25-year, front-row seat watching a man get better and better at what he did for a living as he strove for excellence.”

But we run ahead of the story. From his Arcadian Porus, our "mannersable" and excellent Bert went into the city, to the Kingston Technical High School, where he always came first in his class in Mathematics. When he went to the United States at age nineteen, he thought that he was going to study Engineering, but he found himself, by default rather than by design, in the business school at Baruch College of the City University of New York, going to school at night and working by day to finance his studies. On arriving in America, he had worked at first in an ink factory, for something like one dollar an hour. He was preparing to excel at keeping things "in the black."

Even from his earliest college days, Bert Mitchell showed the leadership and mentorship qualities that were to distinguish his life's work. His close friend Hugh Smith, another "Jamrock" boy, lately Deputy Director of the USAID Mission to Jamaica, testifies to this. They had met in their first days at college. Smith, three years the younger and, in his own words, something of the aimless, party-going type, found in Bert the ideal motivator and "big brother," with the result that Hugh became a high-achieving career officer in the US Foreign Service. To his own siblings, Bert was also to be a great stay and inspirer. The model family man in all senses of family, he would no doubt take us to task if we failed to add, to the list of women who strengthened him, his wife Carol.

But again we must retrace our steps. Bert passed the CPA examination at first attempt, when the failure rate was 75%. He then did the MBA at Baruch, and later the Owner-President Management Programme at Harvard Business School. His subsequent career has brought distinction to both institutions. 1982, the year in which he received City College's Outstanding Alumnus Award, was also the year in which Mitchell & Titus signed Philip Morris as the firm's first Fortune 500 client. He received a similar award from Baruch in 1987, and Harvard Business School's Alumni Achievement Award in 1995. On the occasion of the latter, the Harvard Business School noted that "the gregarious Mitchell continues to play a key role in nurturing [his firm's] client relationships, and he remains the firm's principal visionary, initiating the ideas to position it for new opportunities." The CUNY alumni publication *Insight* refers to him as "the strategic-thinking, market-oriented half of the team" of Mitchell and Titus.

Tonight, Chancellor, we honour him not only for his brilliant achievement in his profession, but also for his corporate citizenship and the great generosity with which he has given back to society, especially to the schools that nurtured and polished him. He has served on the Boards of Directors of over a dozen non-profit organisations and educational institutions, including The Greater New York Fund United Way, Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts' Consolidated Corporate Fund's Leadership Committee, The Baruch Fund, and The One Hundred Black Men, Inc. He has also served on the Visiting Committee of the Harvard Business School. For our present purposes, it is most apposite to note his long and un-trumpeted years of generosity to his Jamaican alma maters, the Kingston Technical High School, the Porus Primary School and other schools in the Porus area.

Expansiveness is what comes to mind when one thinks of "the gregarious Mitchell," he of "the trademark chuckle," and this expansiveness has characterised his giving as much as it has characterised his professional career. The Principal of the Porus Comprehensive High School has been quoted by *Skywriting* magazine to the effect that Mitchell's benefaction "has boosted the morale of everyone: students, teachers, parents." And *Skywriting* quotes Mitchell himself as saying that "more than anything else a good educational system is fundamental to effecting change in the economic and class structure. And that begins at the earliest possible age."

Bert Mitchell has said, Chancellor, that when he looks out from his spacious office high above Manhattan and sees the Statue of Liberty, another fairy godmother, he then closes his eyes and sees Porus. And he ended a recent letter about the prospect of this evening with the words "I am looking forward to coming home." Chancellor, we have come to the happiest of endings, when, by the authority vested in you by the Council and Senate of the University of the West Indies, you will now wave your invisible wand and pronounce the magic words that will turn Bert Norman Mitchell into a Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.

Mona
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