



## Anna Mahase

Mr. Chancellor,

In our efforts to produce graduates and encourage scholarship of high quality, our University is ever mindful of the extent of its debt to the primary and secondary schools. But we readily acknowledge that a supply of well-qualified entrants to our company is an objective no more than sub-ordinate to the larger objective of turning out well-rounded school leavers, most of whom will never proceed to an institution of higher learning. We recognise that the quality of their education, that is, the education of the majority, remains the cornerstone of our hopes for a brighter future.

*'Tis education forms the common mind  
Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined*

Teachers and educationists in the School System are the unsung heroes, and heroines, of modern society, their status diminished by the wide range of opportunities in other, more lucrative, professions, but also by vulgar materialism and falling standards of discipline and morality. Few among them enjoy the esteem of their counterparts of yesteryear - of a Pilgrim or Gocking, a Graf or Valdez, a Bailey, DeFour or Roberts.

It is meet, therefore, that we pay tribute to one of their kind, whose accomplishments as teacher and headmistress of one of the country's leading secondary schools have not only caught the imagination of the public but have already passed into the realms of legend.

I present Anna Mahase, holder of the National Award of Medal of Merit (Gold), Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Education of Mount Allison University, Principal of St. Augustine Girls' High School.

Anna Mahase embodies success in many streams of activity, as a teacher, school administrator, educationist. An active sportswoman in her youth she is known for her contributions to the advancement of sport; her efforts in public service are great and valued. What special qualities underlie these achievements which we now seek to honour? We need not fear to start at the beginning.

Scion of a well-respected, God-fearing Presbyterian family her genealogy is doubly blessed, not least with courage. We learn that her maternal grandmother while still a child, seeking escape from an unhappy union, stole away, alone and unattended, to the waiting vessel bound for Trinidad, boldly facing the vicissitudes of that cruel voyage. Anna Mahase was born in 1932 in Guaico, Trinidad, a village of the thick forests and steaming cocoa plantations, the sixth of seven children. Her father and mother were both teachers - Principal and Vice-Principal respectively, of the Guaico Presbyterian School, her mother having the added distinction of being the first qualified woman of East Indian descent to teach in a state-assisted school. Together they created the ideal environment for a growing family. ... Both set examples of devoted service - as teachers and in community activities. Discrimination on grounds of class, race or religion was severely frowned upon. Their home boasted a well stocked library. They encouraged their children to read and exposed them to music and the classics. But the full significance of this childhood ambience, can be fully appreciated only when seen in the context of the education of boys and girls of the lower income groups in rural Trinidad, among whom the Mahase family lived and worked. These were the forgotten children, especially when they were of East Indian descent. Their culture, customs and language held in contempt by the Colonial society of the day, the mass of the rural East Indian population had invested little in schooling. Although the system of state support for denominational schools had been established by the Education Ordinance of 1870, it applied only to the Christian denominations. Hindu and Muslim schools could not qualify. Canadian Missionary Schools of the Presbyterian faith, such as the school at Guaico, which catered especially for East Indians, were therefore of crucial importance in the primary education system if only because they

provided some psychological comfort for the pariahs of the society. Even so, many families kept their children away, fearing their conversion to an alien faith. Anna Mahase Senior tells of her experience as a teacher at the Grosvenor Mission School, of going out every morning to visit and bring children out to attend classes. Secondary schools were remote - creatures of Port-of-Spain and San Fernando which drew their pupils, almost exclusively, from the middle and upper income groups. As far as the rural poor were concerned they may just as well have never existed. Such were conditions in the 1930's.

Her mewling years spent in the warm embrace of the family home and among the poor at school, life in the real world began in earnest for Anna Mahase when, at the age of 11, she won a Bursary to Naparima Girls High School in San Fernando. It was a painful wrench since she was obliged to board at the school away from the comforts of her Guaico home. She wished to take the Science subjects but they were not offered and so was forced into the Modern Studies group when she moved to Naparima College for the Higher School Certificate. These were uneventful years as she progressed easily to success in all the examinations while taking an active part in a variety of other school activities. By the age of 17 she had left school with no immediate prospect of furthering her education abroad. Fate intervened. In 1950, acting on the recommendation of a Committee on which her mother sat, the Presbyterian Community established the St. Augustine Girls' High School in temporary buildings at Austin Street in St. Augustine. Teachers for the new school being in short supply, the teenage Mahase seized the opportunity for an appointment to teach Mathematics and Geography even if it meant travelling by bus, back and forth every day between Guaico and St. Augustine. It was a turn of events which foreshadowed all that was to come. Her performance so impressed the Principal that she won a scholarship offered by the Women's Missionary Society of the United Church of Canada. As she prepared to leave for Mount Allison University, she shared in the excitement of moving with the School to its new and permanent buildings at Evans Street, Curepe.

Her ambition was to qualify as a doctor, so that she saw her stay at Mt. Allison as giving her the opportunity to obtain the necessary qualifications in the Science subjects before moving to the Medical Faculty at Toronto. But her plans wavered and she decided to remain where she was to continue studies towards a degree in Chemistry.

These were halcyon days. Once settled, she became a model student whose youth and vigour flared into a hundred points of flame. Never neglectful of her studies, her extra-curricular activities, seemingly, were endless as she represented the University in four different games, took part in debates and served on the Women's Council. Miraculously, she also found time to play clarinet in a University band, carried out important duties as Editor of the University paper, Argosy, and shouted herself hoarse as cheerleader. Such was her prowess as an all-rounder, that she won the coveted University award for extra-curricular activities. This carefree campus life, however, was shattered by the sudden death of her father, but she persevered and graduated in 1956.

Three very active years in Canada had helped her to mature, to gain in confidence and to develop formidable skills in organisation and leadership. Whatever her ambitions may still have been, she felt strongly committed to return to Trinidad to teach and readily accepted an appointment as Science Mistress, Head of the Science Department, at St. Augustine Girls'.

In the years that ensued, she was instrumental in developing many new activities, principally in sport, and in the establishment of a Parents-Teachers Association. She also initiated and introduced the House System. The summers of '59 and '60 saw her return to Mount Allison where she qualified for the Bachelor of Education Degree. Five years of solid accomplishment were behind her when the Principal, about to proceed on leave, recommended her to act. Brief feelings of inadequacy and apprehension surfaced but were quickly dispelled. Having no time to pause or ponder or to light herself a torch, she accepted. A year later, in 1962, the incumbent elected not to return and Anna Mahase was installed permanently as Principal. At 29 she had become the youngest person ever, in the Commonwealth Caribbean, to be appointed Head of a leading Secondary School.

The decision to accept this appointment was not without its private agonies, for she had kept open an option which might have taken her back to Canada, to a new and different life. She preferred not to exercise it ... not for her the soft Vermilion mark - the eternal flame, gently kindled, remained unfulfilled. Likewise, any lingering thoughts about a career in Medicine, were finally put to rest. The sudden call to leadership was as daunting as it was challenging, not least because her staff included many who were more senior both in years and experience. At that time SAGHS was the fifth or sixth choice of those who sat for the Common Entrance Examination, and nearly all of its entrants came from outlying rural districts. Only about ten percent achieved the equivalent of a full 'O' Level Certificate, with a similar low level of success at the Higher School Certificate. 1962 was the year of Independence and national feelings were running high. How could this Presbyterian school, fatefully placed in a rural setting, be faithful to the mission of its founding fathers, yet fulfil its role in these changed circumstances? What would it take to transform it to her vision of excellence? All the training and experiences, from Guaico to Mount Allison to St. Augustine, seemingly, had prepared her for this moment, giving her golden provision to carry her on her way. Her convictions crystallised, she set about putting into action those policies which she was convinced would achieve the desired goals: there would be no streaming of pupils according to ability; students would spend five years from entry before taking the 'O' Level examination; no special coaching in Scholarship classes would be allowed; preference would be given to a high level of passes rather than to a few students doing exceptionally well; greater emphasis would be placed on the all-round development of the students and for this reason cultural activities would be given special attention; all religious beliefs would be accorded equal

respect and the festivals of each would be celebrated without favour; and all activities would be characterised by discipline and order in an atmosphere of deep spirituality. That was her prescription. By the early '70's, a decade later, students gaining full certificates at both 'O' and 'A' levels had risen to over sixty percent of those entered. Today the figures stand at between ninety and one hundred percent, the highest in the country. Paradoxically, this school which eschews special coaching for the few, is annually awarded at least as many national scholarships as those captured by the older prestige schools.

Recognising that the career horizons of women were unnecessarily circumscribed by the lack of facilities in the science subjects, she bent her prodigious energies to raising funds for a modern Science wing, equipped it and, in selfless gesture, immediately offered its use to 'A' level students of other schools. In this way she has opened the doors to young women for careers in the Sciences and the science-based professions, notably Medicine, Engineering and Agriculture.

The cultural achievements of the school are no less spectacular. Ably and generously assisted by a gifted sister who, forsaking a career as a concert pianist, returned to a post on the staff, the school has won fame for its musical achievements: the beauty of voice of its choir, its Steelband and the annual calypso competition. The national festival of Carnival, which she introduced in 1964, is enthusiastically celebrated on the school premises, giving expression to the common cultural heritage to which all ethnic groups have so richly contributed.

Anna Mahase has to her credit wide and varied extra-mural activities: in sport, as a Member of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church and in service to the broadcast media. She serves on the Caribbean Examination Council and the special committees which oversee examinations and therefore, in no small measure, is among those responsible for the modernisation of the school examination system. Closer home we recognise our debt to her in the establishment of the College of Arts and Science of the St. Augustine campus and are grateful for her wise counsel as the Chancellor's appointee to the Council of the University. In all these activities she draws a careful line between distractions which compete with her work at the school and public duties which complement it. A member of her staff put it this way:

*A superficial observer may think that a Principal who is so widely involved cannot give her school the attention it needs. On the contrary what has proven to be true is that Miss Mahase's wide concerns have not only educated her in a much broader sense, and so enriched her personally, but in so doing have indirectly enriched the school.*

In 1975, in recognition of outstanding and meritorious service to Education, she received the National Award Medal of Merit (Gold) of Trinidad and Tobago and the Hindu Vishva Parishad Award.

In recording her remarkable achievements, we note that each component is itself deserving of an honour but are conscious that their full value exceeds the sum of the separate parts. The institution, St. Augustine Girls' High School, which she has so honoured, today sets standards for all other schools to follow, but more than that, is a shining example to the wider society which it serves, holding forth that noble ideal:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken into fragments  
by narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms  
towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward into ever-widening  
thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom  
Let my country awake.*

She has given us so much of her wisdom and experience that we hold her in jealous grasp and trust that as an Honorary graduate she will look upon our University as her own.

Mr Chancellor, I request you by the authority of Senate and Council to admit Anna Mahase to the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.