

WOMAN

▼ From Mayaro to Manhattan

A lifetime of service

\\ Simone Young

THERE are women in Trinidad and Tobago who have rendered invaluable service to our country. Often we struggle to recognise them.

They are school vendors, school crossing guards, CEOs, teachers, ground-breaking flight attendants, agricultural workers, public servants, housewives, doctors, domestic workers, lawyers, diplomats and the list goes on.

Our history of slavery, indentureship, colonialism and class stratification and all these have bequeathed us make their achievements even more remarkable.

The story of one such woman has its origins in Mayaro, the picturesque village tucked away in the south-east peninsula of Trinidad.

Mayaro is not only famous for its seascapes but also for producing some of this twin-island republic's best minds. Among the sons and daughters who have left their indelible imprint upon our country, our region and internationally, is a woman of many firsts, Deborah Thomas-Felix.



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In 1990 Thomas-Felix became the youngest person to ever become a magistrate in Trinidad and Tobago and, since then, her career has been characterised not only by its trail-blazing firsts for women but also for its regional and international impact.

In 1994, she was appointed Senior Magistrate and subsequently relocated to St Vincent and the Grenadines to assist in the establishment of that country's Family Court, where she also served as its first president.

In yet another first, the jurist, who became known for her no-nonsense demeanour, zero-tolerance approach to crime and compassionate approach and commitment to social justice, became the first female Deputy Chief Magistrate in 2001.

By 2009, she notched up another first in assuming chairmanship of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the first woman to ever do so. During her tenure at the SEC, Thomas-Felix expanded her regional reach, serving for two terms as the chair of the Caribbean Group of Security Regulators.

After serving two years as chair of the SEC, and after having served as an Industrial Court judge from 2003 to 2009, Thomas-Felix was appointed by President George Maxwell Richards as president of the Industrial Court of Trinidad and Tobago in 2011, the first woman to hold that post. She continues in that role today. Thomas-Felix emphasises that her lifelong philosophy can be summarised by the ethos that "At the end of it all, it matters not how many servants you had but how many persons you have served." Throughout her career she has remained committed to good governance and sound systems, including legal structures, to support sustainable development.

It is this mantra that led to her appointment

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as a judge on the United Nations Appeal Tribunal (UNAT) in December 2014, the first Caribbean national to hold a post in this court.

This tribunal presides on appeals in international administrative law within the UN. In 2015, she was elected second vice-president of the tribunal and, in June 2016, Thomas-Felix was elected president of the Manhattan-based body, a post she continues to hold.

Additionally, in November 2015, she was elected to the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Geneva-based Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), the first national to serve in this capacity.

This influential committee is tasked with reviewing country reports from ILO member states on the implementation of various conventions and recommendations they have ratified to ensure compliance.

Her membership on the CEACR has given T&T a voice with respect to this critical function and ranks her as one of the foremost global experts working at the intersection of labour law, human rights and social justice.

With Thomas-Felix, the local has become global; her accomplishments are a stirring testament to the impact and global reach T&T can have. This home-grown talent has become a highly regarded thought leader, innovator and expert in making the law accessible, relevant and responsive.

Yet Thomas-Felix remains grounded and accessible. "Debbie has remained Debbie, humble and grounded," says Penelope Beckles, one of her oldest friends from their days at The UWI, Cave Hill, and current Ambassador

and Permanent Representative to the UN in New York.

Albert Aberdeen, current judge of the Industrial Court and long-standing colleague, revealed that Thomas-Felix is the ultimate multi-tasker and the quintessential "bleeding heart", always raising funds for those in need or organising food to feed the less fortunate monthly.

ILO director-general Guy Ryder noted in April this year that Thomas-Felix was not only a vocal defender of women's rights, but has also staunchly advocated for the Caribbean sub-region as a member of the ILO's CEACR.

A past pupil of Mayaro Government Primary School, Thomas-Felix attended St Francois Girls' College and North-Eastern College and speaks to these early educational experiences as being significant milestones in grounding and preparing her for a career in public service.

An extremely private person, she emphasises the importance of her close-knit network of family and friends and credits this support with motivating and inspiring her to continued excellence.

Thomas-Felix is far from finished. She continues to receive numerous accolades for her lifetime of service, including a recent Mayoral Award for National Service from the Mayor of Port of Spain, a touching gala organised by her alma mater, St Francois Girls' College, and recognition by The UWT's Cave Hill Office of Alumni Relations as Alumna of the Month of November 2014 for her contribution to the legal fraternity of Trinidad and Tobago and St Vincent and the Grenadines.

The author is Trinidad and Tobago's 2016 Fulbright Hubert H Humphrey Fellow