



Helen Bhagwansingh

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” Shakespeare circa 1600.

This is a 400 year old and still prevailing wisdom. A simple man from South Trinidad, however, dared challenge this dogma. In so doing, he named his first-born, Helen, for he understood that with this name came strength of character and the will to survive and excel. He predicted greatness for his daughter, like the Helens in history, who had overcome great obstacles on their way to greatness. If the persona of Helen of Troy could have launched 1000 ships then this one would launch 1000 businesses. And if Helen Keller had to endure all existing prejudices to overcome deafness and blindness and not just survived but excelled... what path might this Helen have to cut?

With the exception perhaps of open warfare, we are told that business is the most aggressively competitive environment one might encounter. Helen would have had to endure and overcome all the challenges of conventional chauvinism when she dared enter the battlefield of business.

In 1969, the seeds of a small ‘Mom and Pop’ hardware business was planted in apparently infertile conditions in east Port of Spain, at the edge of the Caroni swamp and some still say at the very edge of civilisation – in Sea Lots. We have heard the old

dictum: no risk, no return". Well, this venture would have seemed to the ordinary man all adventure – one with all risk and no return! But Chancellor, we were not dealing with an ordinary man... we are here dealing with an extraordinary woman!

With that humble, high risk strategy 50 years ago, those seeds were sown. And how has that small acorn grown into a giant empire! We can today count megastores across the country providing service to thousands of customers and providing bread on the tables for 1200 employees. Helen Bhagwansingh's business interests include hardware, steel, aluminium, construction, manufacturing and distribution.

At the dawn of the new millennium she was proclaimed "Woman of the Millennium" by the Trinidad and Tobago Energy Chamber. Earlier this year she was inducted into the Business Hall of Fame of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce of Trinidad and Tobago and in its long history, this was the first woman to have ever been so inducted. On Independence Day this year, Helen received our nation's highest honour – The Order of Trinidad and Tobago.

Chancellor, Helen fully understands that it takes more than bricks, mortar and even steel to build a nation. She understands that hearts and minds and souls are far more important. It is for this reason that she has donated generously towards establishment of The Diabetes Education Research and Prevention Institute at The University of The West Indies. Her grant will exist in perpetuity and the proceeds therefrom will be used to ensure that each successive generation of Trinbagonians will have a start better than the one before. Work from this institution has been formulated into policy and is already influencing practice.

Chancellor, you will agree that there is much to a name. Here stands before you, Helen Bhagwansingh— a woman of substance, an entrepreneur and a philanthropist. She is an iron lady with nerves of steel, a mind of high speed silicon and a heart of gold. She has a soul and a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice and endurance.

Where a great woman has led, many can go afterwards, but the honour is hers who has found and cut the path.

So, Chancellor, I invite you to receive her and, by the power vested in you by the Council and Senate of The University of the West Indies, to confer upon her the title of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.

St. Augustine Campus

Friday 28th October, 2011