

2017 BERMUDIANS

Year *of the*

AGENTS of CHANGE

As Barack Obama once said, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time.”

This issue we honour five risk takers who may not have set out to change Bermuda, but whose passion, innovation and tenacity have undoubtedly influenced our island.

Our five honourees include, Bermuda’s new Premier, a long time advocate for children left behind, a CEO whose innovative approach has changed tourism marketing, a courageous human rights activist and a literary bellwether who has extended the reach of the arts deep into Bermuda’s consciousness.

WRITTEN BY
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2017
Bermudians
of the Year



THE POLITICAL POWER PLAYER

David Burt

If media reports through the first half of 2016 were to be believed, the Progressive Labour Party was a rudderless boat with mutinous crew. Opposition leader Marc Bean had disappeared from the public eye due to illness, and the race to replace him had split the party. On one side: Team Lister. On the other: Team Burt.

The struggle for leadership of the PLP was decided the night before the presidential election in the US, with Shadow Finance Minister David Burt beating out Dennis Lister by just four votes. In an effort to unite the party, Burt named Walter Roban—a member of Team Lister—his deputy leader.

“The priority is getting ready for an election, and then it is presenting alternate visions for the people of this country,” Burt said at the time. “The people of this country need jobs, they need opportunity and they need hope. Right now there is very little out there.”

Under Burt’s leadership, the PLP built an election platform focussing on education, specifically phasing out middle schools, implementing a living wage and the promise of tax reform. “The next PLP government will grow our economy by bringing jobs back to Bermuda by creating a payroll tax exemption for any Bermudian company that decide to repatriate previously outsourced jobs back to Bermuda,” he said.

That message resonated louder than anyone could have imagined, and on July 18th the PLP stormed to an historic victory with Burt leading the charge. For many, their victory was unexpected. But not for Burt and his family.

“Whatever David does, he does it well and along the way he always lifts up others,” said his sister, Winsome Burt-Smith, the night of the election. “He has nurtured so many kids, he’s got friends in every country, of every colour. We knew for a long time he would be successful.”

“With our election victory, we have won the tools to make change,” said Burt. “And that is the power to change laws and to control the public purse. But that alone will not make the change to ensure that children and grandchildren of today’s workers will become the producers tomorrow.

“The labour movement and the [Progressive] Labour Party have a chance to write a new script for Bermuda. We can show this country that the lesson of solidarity is unity—unity of vision and unity of purpose.”

—by W.C. Stevenson

Dr. Kim Dismont Robinson

There was a time when writers in Bermuda could be forgiven for feeling they were in a lonely wilderness, cut off from a cultural community that would nurture, inspire and support their work. Enter in 2005 Dr. Kim Dismont Robinson to the Department of Community and Cultural Affairs, based now in the Dame Lois Browne-Evans building on Court Street. Technically, her office is there on the fourth floor but in her role as Folklife Officer she tends to be ubiquitous—she can, for example, be found on the water interviewing fishermen, or shipwreck experts, or in a garden suited up in protective clothing for an interview with beekeepers. Ever since her appointment, she has brought about change through her passionate belief that promoting a congenial atmosphere toward the arts is vitally important for Bermuda. From the start, she also realised that though the community supported dance and visual art, there was not much in place for the literary arts other than the writer-in-residence programme.

Almost immediately she set about changing this state of affairs by bringing in well-known Caribbean writers to conduct writing workshops focusing on a wide variety of genres. They included poets Mervyn Moore, Kendall Hypolite and Christian Campbell, writer and poet Olive Senior, writer of young adult fiction Lynn Joseph, memoirist Rachel Manley and science fiction novelist Tobias Buckell. As a direct result of these workshops, the department has published under her guidance five anthologies: two of poetry, one of young adult fiction, one of memoir, and most recently, one of science fiction entitled *The Stories We Tell: Bermuda Anthology of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror*. These works are helping to fulfil her aim of creating a body of literary work that teachers in Bermuda's schools can draw upon to instil in their students a sense of cultural heritage and belonging. She is also building their cultural resources by creating documentaries on Bermudian traditions, cultural practices and folklife, supplemented by study guides and transcripts available upon request.

So far she has created 15 documentaries, including ones on Bermudian beekeeping, shipwrecks, Emancipation, artists, farming, fishing, foodways and sailing. Her latest focusses on traditional crafts and games, featuring among others Ronnie Chameau and Sean Caisey. She has also commissioned and, through the department, published several works relating to the subjects featured in the documentary as well as other Bermudian topics. They include her latest *Hands On! The Art of Traditional Craft and Play in Bermuda* by Shirley Pearman, *Bermudian Folk Remedies* by Kuni Frith-Black, *Mosaic* by Ruth Thomas and *The Spirit Baby and Other Bermudian Folktales* retold by Florenz Maxwell. Another book on Bermuda during the Age of Revolution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Dr. Clarence Maxwell is in the works.

Thanks to her hard work and her connections with eminent Caribbean writers such as Edwidge Danticat and Jane King Hippolyte, writers in Bermuda need no longer feel, in her words, "poor cousins to writers telling stories of their countries" but rather "a fully realised presence at that table."

—by Elizabeth Jones

THE CULTURAL MENTOR



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Kevin Dallas

Were you to scan the crowds at any given moment during the America's Cup this summer, you'd likely have found the Bermuda Tourism Authority chief Kevin Dallas briskly striding about the village, flanked by a coterie of tourism personnel. Always busy. Always off to one event or another. Less than a year into his new job as CEO, Dallas's task was to make sure Bermuda gained as much as possible by hosting the event—the scale of which the island has never seen before.

While hopes that the America's Cup might return to our shores are all but gone, Dallas isn't much bothered. "Bermuda is really visible now in the world of sailing," he said. "That heightened awareness creates an opportunity to bring other sailing events to Bermuda, or even create some of our own sailing events that will have a link to the America's Cup."

But focussing on the America's Cup might be a red herring, he pointed out.

"Despite the enormous effort around the America's Cup, I think we did a really good job of setting ourselves a series of strategic priorities for the year that were more about the fundamentals of the tourism economy—and sticking to them. Even if we hadn't had the America's Cup this year, I think there is a real energy to tourism on the island at the moment.

"We've continued to make tourism in Bermuda more authentically about Bermudians, and the results of that show in different ways. It shows in the way that people talk about tourism, it shows in the visitors arriving on our shore, and it shows in how many people are choosing to get involved."

Because of the America's Cup, 2017 was a landmark year for the BTA but there was another more fundamental reason. The change in government this summer is the first the BTA has had to deal with. And thus far, Dallas is nothing but optimistic.

"A new government creates challenges and opportunities. There's a new set of faces, and new relationships to be formed, but that creates new opportunities. We worked really hard in the first half of this year to make sure we were sharing our priorities not just with the government, but with the then-opposition as well. So to me it was really validating that many of the things we were talking about worked their way into the PLP's platform, and are now part of their agenda as the new government.

"The obvious example of that is the new Tourism Investment Act, which we believe is a really necessary modernisation of the old concession orders and critical to investment in tourism going forward. It was originally written on behalf of the old government, and is now being carried through with relatively few changes by the new government. And by the time this article is published, it will be law."

—by W.C. Stevenson

THE BRAND MASTER

2017
Bermudians
of the Year

Martha Dismont

For too many years too many children in Bermuda have suffered both emotionally and academically because of their vulnerability to issues outside their control affecting their families: economic challenges making affordable adequate housing difficult to acquire, marital problems, drug and/or alcohol abuse, to mention a few. Gangs have become a harsh reality in Bermuda's society. In Martha Dismont's view, the relatively recent recession, which began in 2009, has brought these problems festering under the surface to the fore and made them more obvious because unemployment figures have risen. Executive director of The Family Centre which she founded, her name constantly comes up as one who is doing her utmost to address the needs of children and their families and to change the way in which we view their problems.

In 1990 Martha started tutoring a student after school because she was concerned he was being teased by the other children about his academic difficulties. Little did she know she was taking her first step towards founding The Family Centre, an organisation which has helped and continued to help hundreds of children recover from, and cope with, many kinds of adversity. The Family Centre began as a tutorial service but a summer programme in 1992 revealed that for many students academic difficulties were linked to emotional problems they and their families were experiencing at home. As a result the children would misbehave in school, their actions further impeding their academic progress. Martha, originally a social worker from New York, came to realise that as so many children were suffering from unaddressed trauma at home, often across the generations, a different approach was needed from just offering academic support. So the Centre shifted to a clinical approach, addressing the emotional needs of children by also helping their families to cope with their emotional and economic difficulties. The Centre offers a continuum of care services, including screening and referral, short-term intervention, all kinds of counselling, homework programmes, Beyond Rugby and youth leadership programmes.

Martha has always been convinced that the punitive culture so prevalent in Bermuda towards children struggling socially and academically only worsens the situation. Who benefits from being blamed? "Instead of asking Johnny, 'Why did you do that?'" she says, "it's far more productive to ask, 'What's happened to you, Johnny?'" The same non-judgmental approach is extended to families needing help for whatever reason. They can make contact with The Family Centre without feeling they are going to be blamed or criticised. Instead they are welcomed by a qualified staff whose approach is hands-on, warm, caring and practical. As a result, the clients—both the children and their families—can see tangible improvements to their lives.

In Martha's view, a vital part of the Centre's work is training, for parents and children, but also for professionals, other social organisations, including schools, and the education ministry, all of whom should be working together. Training is already making positive change for children, as professionals shift from a punitive philosophy to a loving and nurturing one so vital for our children.

—by Elizabeth Jones

THE ADVOCATE & ANGEL

2017
Bermudians
of the Year

Winston Godwin

Sadly, naming Winston Godwin among Bermuda's most influential people in 2017 might seem a bit premature. He and his now husband, Greg DeRoche, had fought exhaustively for their right to marry, but a change in government now puts their achievement under threat.

"When the ruling (Puisne Judge Charles-Etta Simmons ruled that same-sex couples are entitled to be married under the Marriage Act 1944) was given in May, maybe we were a little naive, but we thought it was largely over," said Godwin. "Obviously, there was bound to be some pushback regardless of the outcome. With that being said, I don't think either of us expected to really be under threat and especially from so many angles five months later."

That threat, specifically, is PLP MP Wayne Furbert, who has vowed to repeal the Supreme Court's decision via legislation.

"I think one word that describes it is frustration. It's frustrating that in 2017 this is something that we have to fight for. It's frustrating that even after a Supreme Court ruling, equality is still being threatened. It's frustrating that the only argument of those who are against marriage equality is that 'it's against my religion.' It's frustrating that even after my open letter in which I compared the issue of same-sex marriage and the race issues here in the 60s, that people either refused to see the parallels or somehow believe these issues are entirely different."

But all is not lost. For one, Godwin and DeRoche's victory has made a difference in at least five other same-sex couples' lives. "We've been in contact with some of the couples and seeing how happy this has made them is priceless. It sounds cheesy and cliché, but seeing their happiness and love has made everything we've fought for and continue to fight for all the more worthwhile."

With same-sex marriage now under threat, that fight is more important than ever. Regardless of what happens, their example is one other Bermudians can emulate.

"It would be great if this was somehow the impetus for a stronger sense of community for LGBT members," he said. "At the end of the day if our story is used and people can derive strength and inspiration from it to affect change in a positive way that's more than what either of us could ask for."

—by W.C. Stevenson

THE FREEDOM FIGHTER

2017
Bermudians
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