

By dint of hard work

by JENNIFER FFRENCH

WHO IS Carlton Alexander — that is, besides being one of the most well known businessmen in this country, the president of the Private Sector Organisation of Jamaica (PSOJ), past president of the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce, Board member of numerous companies, and chairman and chief executive of Grace Kennedy and Company Limited?

He is a very patriotic Jamaican who has exhibited unflinching optimism when thousands of others have given up and left, an indefatigable champion of the free enterprise system, and a man who fought his way up from a stock clerk at Grace Kennedy to the number one man in the company which today employs 2,000 people.

"People forget that I am a person," he said during an interview which tried to find out his story, and what makes him tick.

If there was ever a Cinderella story in this country, that of Carlton Alexander is it, and in a way, he is the epitome of what the free enterprise system can produce with hard work, initiative and opportunities.

First of nine children

Born in Montego Bay, to Selwyn and Rosina Alexander on May 9, 1916, he was the first of nine, and when his sickly father died 20 days after his 16th birthday, much of the burden of helping with the support of his mother, the four younger boys and the four younger girls fell on his shoulders.

A year later after passing the Senior Cambridge examinations, his studies on a Government Open Scholarship to Jamaica College were completed, he faced the world with familial responsibilities spurring him to find a job rather than pursue his studies to become the lawyer he had wanted to be.

He found what was to become his first and only job with the young and small company of Grace Kennedy which at the time employed only 15 people. Over the next 47 years, an astute business acumen, plus firm principles passed on to him by his mother would be his guide to the chief executive post in one of the largest locally owned companies in this country.

Family responsibility

His father had died leaving an insurance policy of a £100 and by the time his mother was spending the last of it, he drew his first pay cheque of the lofty sum of £2.00 a week, which he said was a good salary at the time.

"My mother had never worked and it all fell on me," he said, adding that his grandfather (mother's father) who was alive helped but that most of it was his responsibility.

He was followed by three girls, and as they each completed their studies, they played their part by assuming some of the responsibilities, and so it went down the line until everyone was taken care of.

Orange Hill Prep School in Montego Bay and St. John's College in Kingston took care of his earliest education, and besides his years at Jamaica College, other formal education included night classes at Kingston College learning, shorthand, typing and book-keeping.

Today at 64, Mr. Alexander is a self-taught man, a fellow of the Jamaica Institute of Management, and over the last few decades, one of the most sought after lunch and after-dinner speaker at service clubs, schools, and most other functions.

The growth of Grace Kennedy is also the growth of Carlton Alexander, and he recalled that when he joined the company in 1933, there were many companies that were more influential than it, but he and the owner Fred Kennedy wanted it to be number one, and so said so done.

It was no easy task however, for Mr. Alexander said, business was very competitive in the 1930's.

For many years after he was working, he thought about pursuing his ambition to be a lawyer. The influence of JC old boy (National Hero) Norman Manley was great, and others like the Ashenheims were excelling in law. He spent the two weeks of his first vacation leave at Supreme Court listening to some of the brilliant defences that Mr. Manley carried off in those days,

but difficulties with working and studying so that he could qualify plus a growing love for the world of business made him abandon the idea soon after.

Mr. Alexander said that at the time, the fashionable decision was between the commercial field and the civil service, and since many of his classmates were joining the civil service, he passed through a period of conflict but eventually stayed in business.

"I suppose I started to enjoy what I was doing," he said, adding that he also saw a lot of opportunities for development in the business world.

He learnt early that the key to success in business is person-to-person contact, and he capitalised on this, and in addition, he was working with two sound businessmen which helped.

"I was fortunate to work with Mr. Jim Moss Solomon who was a sound if conservative businessman, and with Fred Kennedy who was dynamic and forward thinking, he said, after describing them as two of the finest businessmen that Jamaica has produced.

The man who said that he has been fortunate that he has made his job more than a work, and into a career and a hobby at the same time, said that although people make a mystery out of business there is really no mystery in it.

He said that it was very practical and that the main thing is obligation and application.

"To be in business, you have to be pragmatic, and to make anything a success you have to plan it and follow through." Mr. Alexander said that you must have clear objectives first for yourself and for the people who work for you, and that beside dreams and imaginations which are important, must reside the know-how to implement and bring them to a happy conclusion.

Forceful businessman

A hardnose businessman he is, and also a very forceful one; and he is very intolerant of indiscipline and not doing a job properly. It is said that in the early days of building Grace Kennedy, he was not

unknown for firing a man on the spot, and then telephoning the next morning to ask why he was not at work.

Asked about this reputation, he said: "I let off steam — but when it is finished, it is finished, and that holds even to this day."

"We were brought up the tough way, and I believe work is work and play is play and that they can't be mixed," he said.

Accepting responsibility ranks high on Alexander's scale of principles and he said that he was brought up to believe that it must be accepted, and dealt with.

"I have 2,000 children in the people I employ and each of them has an average of four children which means that I have 8,000 dependents, and I feel responsible for them.

This sense of responsibility seems to have communicated itself to the workers at the Company and weeks before I thought of writing the story of Carlton Alexander an employee said to me "Mr. Alexander... him is one of the greatest. We have been producing things that are not selling because of the economic situation and he hasn't laid off anybody — and I am not saying this because I work here."

Married twice, Mr. Alexander has two daughters by his first marriage which ended in divorce, and two sons and a daughter from the second marriage which has been going for 31 years.

He said that in the early years of mar-

• ON THE COVER •

1. At left, Distinguished Salesman of the Year — Mr. Alexander receiving the Sales and Marketing Executives of Jamaica award for the second year in a row in 1979. Sales and Marketing Executives of Jamaica president Elon Beckford makes the presentation.

2. A familiar role — Mr. Alexander giving one of his many speeches to a service club luncheon. (right)

3. Top photo shows The national honour of Order of Jamaica being conferred upon Mr. Alexander by Governor General Florizel Glasspole in 1973.

riage, his work was sometimes in conflict with his family life, but that he was always known as a good provider. There were times when business was put before family matters but he said that now that the children are all grown up, they understand him better and know that he had their long term interest at heart.

Mr. Alexander was one of the few vocal businessmen who maintained a positive attitude on Jamaica's present economic state and future for a long time and in the face of many negative utterances from many of his colleagues.

Asked about the source of his optimism, he said it stems from the knowledge that Jamaica has potentials in its natural and human resources, but that what he is not sold on, is that changing around political parties is going to help.

"I am optimistic because I feel that this country could have been made to work," he said, adding that our main problems have been a lack of production and sound economic management.

Declaring that he has some very fixed views, he said that if he strongly believes in something — rightly or wrongly — he will stand up for it, whether it is popular or not.



● Today at 64, Carlton Alexander (left) is a self-taught man, a Fellow of the Jamaica Institute of Management, and over the last few decades, one of the most sought after speakers at Luncheons, dinners, etc.

Describing himself as a Jamaican first and foremost, Mr. Alexander believes that education holds the key for the future, and in keeping with this, his company recently invested \$¼ million in higher education through scholarships and in helping to establish a new course at the University of the West Indies.

He is worried about what can be done to unify Jamaica at this time, something which he said the country badly needs.

An implicit believer in the private enterprise system, he said that the system has responsibilities and that the people in it should accept and exercise them.

'Totally anti-Communist'

The man who has been called "the left wing of the PSOJ" said that he is totally anti-Communist and does not think that Communism is any good for Jamaica or that it can help us.

His greatest dream is to see the economy turn around, and he said that as long as he can go and come freely he will never leave Jamaica.

The secret of his success, he said, is that he was fortunate to get an opportunity and he made use of it by the dint of hard-work, and application.

The opportunity for him was getting the job, and he said that he strongly believes that everybody should be given a chance and that people should be encouraged to do the things they do best.

His one weakness, he said, is that he was born first and likes to come first. "I play to win," he said.