

Remembering Amy Bailey

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By Sylvia Lee

TO those who observed the late Miss Amy Bailey from a distance, she appeared as an indomitable spirit — one who, clearly, from the early age of 25 dedicated her life to serving others and never ceased to launch out into uncharted waters in order to secure a better way of life for the less privileged.

But to others, like myself, who had the privilege of falling directly under her guidance and care at an early age — and at times was the recipient of the searing swish of her merciless castigation — the late Miss Bailey came to be regarded with awe and humour. The awe we felt grew out of the fact that she was a no-nonsense teacher, whose insistence on discipline applied equally to deportment and behaviour as to performance. With her unmistakable lisp, she warned me, "If you write shorthand like this and send it to England, the examiners there will fail you like a dog...So make up your mind." Needless to say, I had no wish to 'fail like a dog', so I took her message...And to her lasting credit as a teacher of shorthand, I earned the highest mark given to a student by the British examiners in the Royal Society of Arts exam that year. And while she praised me at graduation time, I knew deep in my heart that it was the shaming she had subjected me to, that had done it.

Great teacher

And here, again, another side to that great teacher and champion of the rights of women came to the fore. She could be as harsh as a judge in the imposition of discipline, but as warm, friendly and thoroughly human in the acknowledgement of accomplishment or good conduct. Never did she ever fail to give credit or pay compliments where these were due.



So, after the many thousands of us, who 'passed through her hands' had graduated from Kingston Technical School and stepped out into the world, we remained fast friends of Miss Amy. Indeed, those of us who did not pay regular visits to her home, frequently called her on the telephone, and her response was always one of great joy and considerable satisfaction. Indeed, just two months ago, she indicated that she wanted me to do some research into her activities during the 1930's and early 1940's...But time was not on her side.

A quality which was unmistakable in the late Miss Amy was unswerving dedication to serving her country's people; for even as she taught and worked with students and other youngsters on a one-to-one basis, she found time to pioneer for social reform. And not only did she write letters to the **Gleaner** pointing out the social inequalities to which Black people in the society were subjected and demanding change, she made frontal assaults on the system, as she did in her encounter with Governor Edward Denham during his visit to Kingston Technical. And her advocacy paid off when students of the school were permitted to sit the Civil Service Entry examination and enter the Civil Service.

Dedicated

So dedicated was Miss Amy to championing the rights of the less privileged and particularly women, that even while she put in yeoman service at Kingston Technical, she busied herself establishing the Housecraft Training Centre on Rosedale Avenue in Kingston. And after more than forty years' service at Kingston Technical, Miss Amy

threw her energies into the training of young women in home economics at the Housecraft Training Centre, which she ran until failing health forced her to give up.

For many years, that institution became not only a training centre in home economics for young Jamaican women; it was a place which catered to many households; served authentic Jamaican food in simple, homely style and became the meeting-place for the local branch of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, of which Miss Amy was a founding member.

During her nearly 95 years of life, the late Miss Amy's advocacy for human dignity, particularly for women, spread far and wide. Along with Mary Morris Knibb and others, she founded the Women's Liberal Club in 1937. She was one of the earliest advocates for birth control during the 1930's — a platform which was far from popular at the time. She, along with others, organised the first Jamaican Women's Conference in 1938; this called for full political rights for women and demanded an end to discrimination against women in employment.

Later, along with her sister, Ina, Miss Mae Farquharson and Mary Morris Knobb and others, she led a delegation of women to the Governor to demand the right of women to vote on equal terms with men. They won their demand and later that year, Miss Amy and other members of the Women's Liberal Club organised the campaign of Miss Mary Morris Knibb for election to the Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation. In doing this, they were not only the first women's organisation to support and organise an electoral campaign, they were the first to be victorious.

Only recently, she was honoured as one of the founders of the Save the Children Fund, demonstrating once again, that hers was not a role merely to talk, but to do...And so it continued up until the end. For it was only two months ago that she issued a public appeal for reform in the island's prisons.

So today — and I speak for all graduates of Kingston Technical School who were taught by her — even as we mourn her passing, we express grateful thanks to God for the life of the late Hon. Amy Bailey, O.J., and for the fact that we were beneficiaries of such a grand and rich gift to Mankind.