

2006: CYRIL LUCIUS DUPREY (1897-1988)

In 1961, on the occasion of Colonial Life's Silver Jubilee Convention, Prime Minister Dr. Eric Williams, in an address said this to Cyril Lucius Duprey: "I know at first hand the difficulties, both social and economic, that you have faced since 1936. The discouragements, the resistance from envious competitors and jealous countrymen, the apathy of those in high places to national development and our basic community rights, the organisational problems, the corrupt influences in our society which are reflected in our deplorable standards of personal honesty. I congratulate you warmly on your triumph over these deficiencies in our national character."

Strong words of praise to Mr. Cyril Duprey from Dr. Williams, a man not known for giving frivolous compliments.

Cyril Lucius Duprey was born on March 3, 1897. On December 15, 1936, he founded Colonial Life Insurance Company Limited in the face of overwhelming advice from friends that said, "Coloured people could not succeed in business." Never discouraged, he would reply "If you give a man service it does not matter what is the colour of your skin." He believed that it was quality and the content of your character that really mattered.

The recipient of a Chaconia Gold Medal in 1977, Mr. Duprey was also honoured by Queen Elizabeth II in 1956 with the Order of the British Empire (OBE). In 1953, he also received a bronze plaque from the United Mutual Life of New York for the part he played in establishing that company.

Owen Baptiste in the book “Duprey” gives an interesting insight into his character and the quality and style of leadership practiced by him, which up to this day, remain prerequisites for success.

Like having a dream and holding on to it for dear life. In 1984, Cyril Duprey’s former Secretary, Judith Ifill-Jarvis, in an interview, talked about listening to her boss as he lectured to agents:

She said “He kept telling them about the things he had in mind and visualised that in a short time things would change. He would tell them that one day there would be a monument erected in the city of Port of Spain and that those who worked hard and stuck with the company, would be proud and say ‘I helped to build a block in this building.’” She said she would wonder what he was talking about because you could not see it – not in this small office they held with people paying such small premiums. But Cyril Duprey saw it – he had the dream, the vision and refused to let go.

He was also a man who always knew that good business must be built on a foundation of trust and integrity and in those days, “corporate governance” was not quite on the radar as it is today.

Ray Diefenthaler, one of his oldest friends, said “Cyril knew his business. He knew how to lead men and inspire confidence.” When he lectured to agents, he emphasised honesty, saying “we didn’t want anyone to be in doubt of what we were offering policy holders because dishonest agents, men who lied, could have destroyed the company.” He was proud of Colonial Life’s record of never having been sued for failing to pay any claim. George Kangaloo, a friend, said

“Duprey liked you to be straight with him. If you are straight and discharge your duties, and he can trust you, you can get almost anything from him.” Duprey, in his own words, said “If you do things in an honest way, people will always have confidence in you. They will always trust you.” Words true to this day.

A known raconteur, Duprey had the gift of the gab. He loved people, loved to laugh, to engage you and to give jokes. And he was great at it. His friends swore that they knew no one who could give a joke like him, and more particularly, the risqué rude types. You always knew when he arrived at a party. The jokes would start and people would be laughing.

The late Neil Jones remembered Duprey as “caring, loving and concerned about people.” Lionel Nurse remembered Duprey with “his door as open as his heart.” Peter Salvary remembers him always taking the time, not only to shake your hand, but embrace you and spend at least five minutes finding out how you were doing.

Undoubtedly, he stirred a deep trust and an unwavering loyalty in the people whose lives he touched.

On Duprey’s 89th birthday, Lionel Nurse told a story about making a maiden trip to Columbia University for training in 1955. He was a new agent and Duprey was managing director. Duprey coincidentally was on the same boat. Nurse recalled how for each of the five days out at sea, Duprey would come to his cabin and check on him, morning and evening, inviting him to eat and have a drink with him. Says Nurse, “When a managing director could pay such

attention to a brand new salesman who has not yet made his mark, I think it speaks volumes for the quality of that man.” Supportive of this picture of Duprey is Gerard Montes de Oca, who says he was “totally compatible with people of every kind.”

Duprey’s visionary spirit was remarkable. Dr. Eric Williams, noted this, and said:

“When the decision to form the company was taken in 1936, it could only be that Duprey had a vision of the future, not only in Trinidad but of the then unborn Federation of the West Indies.”

And that was why he used the name “Colonial” from inception and not “Trinidad” or “Trinidadian”. Indeed, when challenged by Dr. Eric Williams in 1961, to change the name of the company from Colonial Life to something more Trinidadian, in the face of the growing clamour against colonialism, Duprey, stubborn as ever, refused to budge, believing, too much goodwill was built up and it would be difficult and costly to change the name. So in response, he would ask Dr. Williams, “Why don’t you change the name of BWIA – British West Indies Airways?” And that was that.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Cyril Lucius Duprey’s vision, charm, love and passion for people and his country, his dedication, innovative spirit, independence of thought, and courage have been the foundation of the diversified, strong and powerful conglomerate that is CLICO today. There is a plaque beneath his picture at CLICO’s head office which says “In tribute to his inspiring leadership,

courage and industry without which this institution, now an enduring monument to his genius, would not have existed.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, in the words of Sir Ellis Clarke, “For what he has attained, for what he is, we all stand in his debt.”

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce salutes C.L. Duprey; his thoughts, words and above all, his deeds continue to be the foundation on which successful businesses are built and stand the challenges of the present time and will no doubt continue to influence, to shape and to mould all of today’s leaders.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mr. Cyril Lucius Duprey (posthumously) into the Business Hall of Fame on this 10th October, 2006.