

2010: HELEN BHAGWANSINGH

On 7th October 1940, Daniel and Vilna Ramoutarsingh had their first child, a baby girl who was christened Helen. She was the eldest of four children and was followed by her siblings, Jack, Rajpaul, and Betty all of whom were educated at Grants Presbyterian School in San Fernando. The Ramoutarsingh family lived first at Union Road, and then Main Road, Marabella.

Daniel ran a successful hardware establishment in San Fernando and from an early age his four children helped him out at the store after school. At age eleven, he took Helen out of school and placed her in charge of the bicycle repair department of his business, which she handled very efficiently. Little did Daniel realise that his first born would turn the then Ramoutarsingh's Hardware into a family dynasty.

Helen continued at this job until 1959 when she got married to Hubert Bhagwansingh, a radio technician with International Air Radio at Piarco. The newly married couple then moved to their recently constructed residence at Valsayn, just next to the Drive-In Cinema. When the then owners, McEnearney & Co. Ltd., put their cinema up for sale in 1969, she bought it and ran it successfully for eight years after which time it was sold.

It was then that her father called on her to fill in for a sick employee at his small branch store at Sea Lots which at that time comprised a small 20x20 foot galvanized iron shed from which building blocks were sold. The premises were surrounded by a mangrove swamp and Trinidad's largest dump known as the "La Basse". Over the next two years, with the help of her husband, she turned the former shed and swamp area into a thriving outlet for Ramoutarsingh's Hardware. She then acquired the business from her father and carried on under the designation of Bhagwansingh's Hardware - signaling the start of her own empire. Gradually they added cement, steel and lumber to their product range and later purchased the land adjoining the shed at Sea

Lots and expanded the hardware to include a full range of building materials. The Chaguanas store was opened in 1988 and Marabella in 1995.

In the late 1990's, on the recommendation of her bankers, Mrs. Bhagwansingh acquired two companies that had been in serious financial difficulties, Dansteel in 1996 and Centrin in 1998. Today, both companies are profitable, most of their debts having been paid off and they are firmly on the road to self-sustained growth. She also has significant shareholding in Cantrex, an aluminum extrusion manufacturer and in Rainbow Construction, a company that builds low and middle-income houses.

In March 2007 Bhagwansingh's opened a new, ultra-modern hardware in Trincity, which is the largest of its kind in Trinidad and Tobago and possibly the Caribbean. The group of companies employs over twelve hundred persons who hail from many parts of Trinidad and Tobago, and in the tradition passed on by her deceased parents, her four children, Suzanne, Wendy, Trevor and Terry, have worked in the business from a young age.

Mrs. Bhagwansingh is a visionary. She is thoroughly aware of the trends driving the international economic environment. She has superior analytical and problem solving skills and is able to cut to the core of issues. She is therefore a spectacular decision maker and a natural when it comes to assessing risks. She deploys her forces like a general and once she focuses on a target, there is no turning back. In 2000, she was named "Woman of the Millennium" by the Energy Chamber at its annual awards dinner.

Mrs. B, as she is popularly called, is an exemplar to her family, friends and her employees. She is bright, works exceptionally hard and keeps her promises. Courage, however, is the defining quality of this phenomenal woman.

Mrs. Bhagwansingh is Presbyterian and a deeply spiritual person. She understands that to whom much is given much is required and is a regular

contributor to many charities. She established a trust for Diabetes Education, Research and Prevention with a donation of five million dollars after learning that the incidence of diabetes in Trinidad and Tobago was approaching epidemic proportions.

Mrs. Bhagwansingh's passions are her family and her business. Whilst she ensures that her businesses are conducted in accordance with sound commercial principles and business integrity, corporate social responsibility is equally important to her. With respect to her family, no sacrifice is too big for her to make. Indeed, it can be said that she lives for her family.

But she does have a weakness. She is like putty in the hands of her grandchildren. Every owner of a toy store should have a permanent sign saying "Welcome Mrs. B". She is a bit tougher on her children but they are undoubtedly one of her major sources of strength and inspiration.

Her relationship with her husband Hubert is one to be admired. They have been married for 51 years. There is no doubt that he is her best friend, her business confidante and that she loves him even more today than fifty-one years ago. He has been happy for her to take centre stage. They are a great pair.

Every Christmas Mrs. B is surrounded by smiles as she lights up the roof of her home facing the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway. Santa sits on Rudolph with a big smile, the rest of the reindeer gang illuminating her village for miles. And over the hills of Laventille and the city of San Fernando, a bright star shines almost as brightly as the one that guided the wise men to the Christ child - all courtesy of Mrs. B.

Brave, courageous, passionate, magnanimous, problem solver, decision maker, communicator, risk taker, exemplar, role modelall of these are appropriate descriptions of Mrs. Helen Bhagwansingh.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mrs. Helen Bhagwansingh into the Business Hall of Fame on this 24th November 2010.