

2013: HARRY SOOKNARINE (1933-2010)

On the humblest of building blocks, Harry Deosaran Persad Sooknarine engineered a family empire constructed upon the unshakeable belief that business success is made up of equal parts hard work, personal service and business acumen. On every count, he scored off the chart.

Perhaps it was the combination of sales genes inherited at birth on August 9, 1933, from his great grandfather Barney, a travelling salesman, and the work ethic learned as a child in Kelly Village from a father who lived the hard life of the cane farmer, and a mother who encouraged a sense of responsibility among her nine children. Marriage to hometown beauty Kamla Ramroop, daughter of the highly-respected Ramroop Maharaj of Kelly Village, enhanced his drive to prove himself by success.

The instinct for business, a willingness to work hard and a sense of responsibility for family all came into play when, after leaving Brazil E.C. School where he was a teaching monitor to attend Osmond High School in Port of Spain, he joined his mother selling vegetables by night at the Port of Spain Central Market. There, among the vendor stalls, he learned the art of the sale, sizing up customers, identifying their needs, negotiating prices and making the deal.

In 1953, at age 20, and newly married, the budding salesman ventured into another branch of sales, first at Lionel Jeffers' **book store and then at Jutagir's Hardware on Independence Square. Within six years, he was ready to strike out on his own.**

In 1961, with a loan of \$563 from Chase Manhattan Bank, he and Kamla opened a little shop, Red Spot, in California, Central Trinidad which soon developed into a booming roti shop and chicken depot. By 1965, the Sooknarines had done well enough to return to Kelly Village and buy a grocery store with about \$15,000 in stock **from Kamla's uncle, Basdeo.**

Sooknarine's Grocery and Bar operated with the business rhythm of the sugar-cane harvest. Customers settled their bills during the crop-time and racked up credit in the off season. With business thriving, Harry Sooknarine soon acquired a bigger and more modern supermarket, introducing the concept of self-service to Kelly Village.

All five of their children - Roger, Kendrick, Jefferson, Lenore and Victor - were hands-on in the business, working **alongside their parents in gruelling days that didn't end until 10.30 at night.** Family fun-time was reserved for after shop hours on Thursday afternoons and on **weekends when the entire family would pile into the family's truck and head off to Mayaro for ritual beach-limes.**

Eventually, however, the culture of a sugar-cane community based on part-time employment began to take its toll on the business with an expanding list of debtors. Anticipating the future, Harry Sooknarine set out to find new opportunities for business, utilising his last proceeds from the supermarket. For a time, in the late 1960s, he found it in insurance, going door-to-door, employing his people skills and network of relationships to expand the clientele of Combined Insurance. It was during this period, following a trip to the United States in search of a better concept, that he came up with the idea for door-to-door cosmetic sales. It was the right idea at the right time.

Tight foreign exchange conditions had made the imported favourite, Avon Cosmetics, scarce and expensive while the changing consciousness about identity in post-colonial Trinidad and Tobago was opening new opportunities in make-up for women of colour. Thus was born Caribbean Pride Cosmetics in 1972, the business that would bring Harry Sooknarine his first one million dollars. The actual manufacturing was outsourced while he concentrated on the packaging, marketing and distribution of his line, developing a direct distribution network with door-to-door sales.

The cosmetic sales started in 1972 with one car driven by his wife Kamla. The door-to-door sales strategy was so effective that by 1974 demand for Caribbean Pride products required a sales force of over sixty persons spread

throughout Trinidad, with a large complement of cars. **The entire sales team was under Kamla's management** with the children involved as well.

It was cosmetics that led Harry Sooknarine to the enterprise that propelled him into the top ranks of business innovators of Trinidad and Tobago. While Caribbean Pride enjoyed tremendous popularity, Sooknarine was not happy with the black and white labels that were available to local manufacturers which he found crude and unappealing. Further, having to glue them on was time-consuming and irritating. Not one to live with a problem, he went to **the United States in 1974 for training in label design at Pell's Art School in New York and to** investigate labelling solutions. He ended up adopting pressure sensitive adhesive labels and buying a three-colour flexographic press which is still at Cariflex (1994) Ltd. today.

In 1974, with new acquisitions estimated at a total investment of TT\$1.6 million and a workforce of 12, he launched a second company, Caribbean Flexographic and Foil Printers. It took the market by storm by concentrating printing, adhesives and cutting into one single, seamless operation, thereby reducing cost and time. Here again, direct relationships with his **clientele were key to Harry Sooknarine's marketing success. In** 1992, he purchased T&T Printing and Packaging Limited, one of the first state-divested companies. Two years later, **the company's name was changed to Cariflex (1994) Limited.** Today, Cariflex has one of the largest printing presses with the greatest capabilities, capacities and colour-options in the printing and packaging industry in the Caribbean.

A lesser man might have been satisfied with expanding into the printing business, but not Harry Sooknarine. On a visit to the United States in 1980, he became excited by a dry packaged concrete mix which he believed would fare well in the local market, given demand conditions in the construction industry. Out of this was born Harricrete Ltd., the first dry-packaged cementitious-product manufacturing Company, with the famous tagline **'de hardest hard'.**

While his business grew into an empire, Harry Sooknarine was simultaneously battling his greatest personal challenge. In 1974, just as his business was taking off, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a degenerative condition which weakened his limbs and eyesight. But his indomitable spirit would not allow him to give up. He adapted his management methods to the demands of wheelchair mobility and in the process increased his success. Being in a wheelchair also gave him a special insight into the challenges of the physically handicapped whom he assisted with regular donations of wheelchairs through the Cariflex/Harricrete Foundation Fund. One venture that remained dear to him was the annual **elders' Christmas** Lunch at the Kelly Village Presbyterian Church into which he threw great energy and which continues as an important aspect of the life of his beloved Kelly Village. In 1997, in recognition of his achievement in business, Harry Sooknarine was awarded a national Hummingbird Medal (Gold).

In academic circles, his practical experience as a successful self-made entrepreneur was sought after, especially **at UWI's Institute of Business where he shared his insights and experiences** with successive cohorts of students. Budding entrepreneurs found in him a generous and willing mentor and friend.

Although he passed away in May of 2010, the legacy of Harry Sooknarine endures today in the family and business that he and his wife Kamla built, and in the Cariflex motto of "Quality and Service".

For his five children, 13 grand-children and 6 great-grand children, the enduring memory of Harry Sooknarine is of a man whose independence and focused hard work changed the course of many lives, especially theirs.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mr. Harry Sooknarine into the Business Hall of Fame 16th November, 2013.