

Ignatius Ferreira

The walls of Ignatius Ferreira's office at the headquarters of the Furness Group of Companies in Sea Lots are covered with plaques and certificates marking all the honours that have been bestowed on him. He's obviously proud of them—yet also mildly, modestly surprised to have received them.

In 1984, for example, he was given a Father of the Year award by the National Father's Day Council—but when asked what he thinks he did to deserve that, he replies simply, "I haven't got a clue." (The citation explains that the awardee must have demonstrated commitment and must be a good role model). It's obvious that Ferreira must have been doing something right: three of his four sons followed him into what—against the odds—became the family business. William, his second son, is his assistant; Johnny runs Furness Chemicals; and Patrick manages Furness Rentals.

Ferreira has come a long way, literally and otherwise. He grew up (like his friend JB Fernandes), in Chaguanas, where his father, Silvano, ran a shop and a rumshop, after coming to Trinidad from Madeira. But his maternal grandmother lived on Belmont Circular Road, and young Ignatius, the youngest of three children, was sent to school at Belmont Boys' Intermediary, catching the train on Mondays and returning home to Chaguanas at weekends, when his father would meet him at the station. But Silvano died when Ignatius was eleven, and the family moved into town to live with his grandmother.

On leaving school, given the family circumstances, his future didn't look particularly bright. In 1946 Ferreira became an office boy at the Furness Withy Group of Companies. The group has a long history stretching back to the early nineteenth century and the firm of Turnbull, Stewart and Company—Gregor Turnbull, another self-made man, came here from Scotland in 1831. The company was involved in asphalt and in sugar estates, as well as owning ships and importing goods from Britain. It also became involved in construction— many of its buildings were designed by one of its employees, the famous architect George Brown, who changed the nineteenth-century face of Port of Spain. The group at one time also included the Trinidad Trading Company and the Caroni Sugar Estate (Trinidad) Ltd.

Following in Gregor Turnbull's footsteps many years later, another ambitious young man, Ignatius Ferreira, also wanted to better himself, so in his spare time he studied accountancy—but then decided he didn't like it. So the company sent him to its London offices to study marketing, only to receive a shock when he returned home two years later: he was put in the sales department, where he increased sales of Johnnie Walker scotch by 300 percent. With a commission at the normal rate, it meant he earned more than anyone else in the company. Rather unfairly, the company cut his commission, but they kept an eye on this promising young man, and promoted him rapidly.

Thus by the early 1960s, Ignatius Ferreira was managing director of the Trinidad Trading Company, and in 1971 he became its general manager. In 1973 he was made the first local director of Furness Withy—all the other directors up to that time had been English, of course. He was appointed managing director in 1973, and in 1976 Furness Trinidad shares were first traded on the local stock exchange. The board took the company public, Ferreira explains, because: "We felt more people should be involved—we welcome those who would like to be involved."

In 1980 Furness Withy was bought by a Hong Kong-based businessman who had no interest in Trinidad, so he summoned Ferreira to London and offered to sell him the local arm of the company. Ferreira explained that he couldn't afford it, but the new owners arranged a manageable deal, and he found himself in possession of a third of the company. By 1983 he was the chairman and CEO of Furness Trinidad Ltd., and by 1987 it was wholly locally owned.

Under Ferreira, the company continued with marketing, but he closed down its ice factories, since by now people owned their own fridges. However, he retained the commercial cold-storage facilities, and started a car-rental business. He moved the company from its Richmond Street base, which was becoming too small to handle the containers that were coming into use, and moved the head office too, from the well-known spot at the corner of Independence Square to its new building in Sea Lots. Today the company is involved in a wide range of trading, manufacturing and service enterprises, general insurance and chemical manufacturing, as well as shipping, automotives and marketing.

Asked the secret of his success, he answers immediately and with passion: “Dedication.” It’s hard work, plain and simple. “If they told me to come to work for eight, I would be there at seven, and I wouldn’t leave until my work was finished.”

Ferreira met his wife, Elia, a Venezuelan, through playing football for Casuals Club with the family she boarded with, the Pantins. They married in 1956 and have five children - four boys and a girl.

Even while running the group and making time for family life, Ferreira’s self-discipline and capacity for work meant he could find time for public service of many kinds. He served as president of the Shipping Association, as well as belonging to the Lions Club and the Rotary Club of Port of Spain. He’s been part of the Boy Scout movement since he was a child himself; and he was made a Knight of St John by the Queen for his service as commander and chair of the St John’s Ambulance Association. Ferreira has also been the honorary consul for Portugal since 1985, as well as being dean of the consular corps, and he headed the Portuguese Association for 30 years.

But when asked which of all the honours he’s received in the past makes him most proud, he answers immediately: “Being granted a knighthood by the Holy Father.” That was Pope John Paul II, who in 2000 made him a knight of the Order of St Sylvester, one of the highest honours that can be granted to a layman by the Catholic Church.

Asked how he feels about being inducted this year into the T&T Chamber’s Business Hall of Fame, Ferreira says, “I was very surprised and pleased. I’m always grateful that someone has recognised what I’ve done.” But you mustn’t do anything just for the sake of recognition, he stresses, “You do these things because that is how you are.”

That’s why, at 88, he remains the Furness group’s chief executive and still goes to work every day—very early, he points out, adding: “I enjoy coming to work.” His wife knows better than to try to persuade him otherwise, he says. It’s clear that the powerful work ethic that set Ignatius Ferreira on the road to success over sixty years ago is still his driving force.

It is therefore an honour for the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce to induct Mr. Ignatius Ferreira into its Business Hall of Fame.