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A Tribute to Estella Scott-Roberts: Advocate, Victim, National Icon

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Estella Scott-Roberts was a woman small in stature yet giant in heart, whose infectious, hearty laugh, determined chin and tremendous personal strength added character to her physical beauty. What she has come to symbolise to the people of the Cayman Islands, however, is a woman of principle, truth and courage who was a tireless and passionate advocate for the vulnerable. Fiery, strong-willed and with no patience for hypocrisy, she was an often controversial community figure. Some labelled her as a troublemaker because she voiced the awful facts about gender-based violence and sexual abuse in a society where such things are not discussed in public, but rather whispered about in hushed tones behind closed doors. She bluntly aired our community's dirty laundry, which forced us to acknowledge the ills in our society so that we might begin to address these issues.



Estella Scott-Roberts

Her passion was in the protection of victims of gender-based violence but especially in exposing the issue of child sexual abuse. As a resolute 26-year-old, she had taken on the role of Executive Director of the Cayman Islands Crisis Centre (CICC) for five years. She oversaw the conceptualization, development and initial operations of the Centre and led her team to firmly establish the CICC as a legitimate and necessary agency within the community. On-call 24 hours a day, she often responded to late night emergencies and regularly received death threats. Her dedication to the Centre and its clients was further manifested when she cleared out sewerage and debris from the Centre after the devastation of Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

Estella was often in the public eye, whether on radio, television, or in video clips highlighting the needs of vulnerable women and children in the community. Many in the community who were incensed that she would bring such ugly issues to the forefront were concerned about tourists' perception of our islands should these issues remain on the front pages of local newspapers and be discussed on the radio talk shows. She tirelessly spoke out, nevertheless, to the press, government ministers, and the corporate world, all of whom respected her as a passionate, if somewhat controversial, advocate. She regularly spoke to schoolchildren across the Cayman Islands about issues of personal safety and child sexual abuse. However, the very nature of this society's denial was unfortunately emphasised when she was asked not to return to a particular school to discuss these issues. She publicly acknowledged this response by noting that the denial of this problem would inevitably harm our children.

Estella Scott-Roberts' greatest impact on the perception of gender-based violence in the Cayman Islands ironically occurred when she became the most famous victim of this crime. On the night of October 10, 2008, after celebrating her 33rd birthday, she was attacked at her vehicle, abducted after a struggle, raped, killed and her body burnt so that it took several days to officially identify her remains. The horrific nature of this crime and the prominence of its victim sent shock waves throughout the community. The jolt of recognition that Cayman was no different from 'those other places' where women were attacked was deeply shocking to both men and women alike. Several days later, on October 18, unprecedented thousands turned out for the Silent Witness March to express their outrage in their silent walk through the capital of George Town as tribute to the victims of gender-based violence.

In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, "It is better to light the candle than to curse the darkness." Estella's husband, Rayle Roberts, described Estella's life as a light that shone brilliantly, highlighting the many dark recesses of our society. Hers was a light that expired too quickly and rather than curse the darkness that was upon him with the tragic death of his wife, he decided to light a candle in her memory and so the Estella Scott-Roberts Foundation was born on October 31, 2008.

The mission of the Estella Scott-Roberts Foundation is "Gender Equality and A Life Free of Violence For All". The Foundation's objectives are to:

- a) advocate for a life free of violence;
- b) carry out activities to facilitate the empowerment of women and girls;
- c) advocate for and support equity and equality for women and girls in all areas of life;
- d) support policies and research projects that further the aim of gender equality;
- e) do all other acts or things necessary, advisable or desirable for the advancement of women's issues.

During Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April 2009, the Foundation co-sponsored a "Breakfast with Candidates" event discussing sexual assault with political candidates prior to the national elections and promoted its message through radio public service announcements. The Foundation is determined to make a positive impact on the issue of gender-based violence and has decided to highlight the role men play in achieving gender equality.

On October 10, 2009, which would have been Estella's 34th birthday, the Foundation marked the one-year anniversary of her death by launching a public education and awareness campaign entitled "Be the Change", which highlights the importance of men and women working together to achieve gender equality and a life free of violence. Justice for Estella remains elusive as her accused killers still await trial. Estella's vibrancy will remain in the memories of those who loved her; her passionate work will be carried on through the Foundation, the Cayman Islands Crisis Centre and other organisations; and her advocacy and voice will continue to echo in the community. May her soul rest in peace.