

# Life stories 20 questions

# Hazel Brown, tireless crusader



By NASSER KHAN

MANY will remember her for her vociferous protests in 1999 in the wake of the changing of the name of the main street in Diamond Vale. But her voice is more consistently heard and known in advocating for the advancement of women and consumer rights. Over the years she has been involved in several voluntary social action groups and is the secretary-general of the Commonwealth Women's Network, linking women in 52 countries.

A fourteen-year cancer survivor she is an advocate and supporter for many cancer patients. She was recently awarded a grant to develop a model solar cooker (one of her many projects) as a way of conserving energy resources.

**1 Most people will not know what life as a social activist/worker is like. What would you say to them and what advice would you give to anyone contemplating a vocation such as yours?**

It is not an easy life. People can be very vicious and unkind if they do not agree or understand what you are about. I tried to stay out of partisan politics and when I did venture in, I joined the ONR which I believed could have brought change to our political scene. When that did not work I determined a non-partisan but very political role for myself, knowing full well the possible consequences of political victimisation. I therefore organised my life and my income-generating activities so that I could be independent of any political or state agencies so that I could speak and act freely.

**2 When through your work you experience the fallout of social issues happening in our country what are your thoughts? Solutions?**

I think we all need to work harder and that the solutions lie within our local communities if only we would learn to work together in our

own interest and without partisan politics.

**3 Where were you born and where did you grow up?**

Born on Myler Street in Belmont and grew up on Belgrade Street in East Dry River.

**4 What was it like growing up in your family?**

I was the eldest of five children, four girls and a boy. We were very much an extended family so I grew up under the influence of my maternal grandfather, paternal grandmother and aunts. My mother was a great networker and she made sure that we were in contact with our relatives where ever they were. I was close to my father and admired his skill as a printer and a communicator. It was the time before television so we read a lot and listened to the radio a lot.

**5 Who were the people who influenced you the most in your career and in life in general and how did they?**

I was influenced by a lot of people. My primary school teachers who took a lot of interest in me. My Moravian Sunday school teachers. Sister Francis Xavier of St Joseph's Convent. When I joined the Public Service I was mentored by some fantastic women.

As a young married woman I joined the Housewives Association in the 70s. I learnt a lot about organising for change with an amazing group of women — Faith Wiltshire, Annette Wiltshire, Ellen O'Malley Camps, Leonora McShine to name a few. From all of these women I learnt the art of organising and developed a passion for standing up for what you believe and taking joint action.

**6 Which social worker(s)/activist(s) do you admire the most?**

Nesta Patrick, Faith Wiltshire and Asha Kambon.

**7 Tell us about your inspiration to do the type of work you do. What keeps you going in spite of all the frustrations?**

I do not know. I suppose I was born to do it. I was that way inclined since I was a child. I often feel frustrated but there are always one or two people who I can talk to and get back on the road again with new insights and energy.

**8 Who was your hero or "idol" growing up (fictional or real)?**

I do not recall having a hero or idol except, in a way, my father.

**9 At what schools/institutions did you receive your education?**

I went to Gloucester Lodge Moravian primary school and won the first exhibition from that school from the Port-of-Spain City Council to Bishop Anstey High School. I got into trouble there and I was sent to St Joseph's Convent PoS. I sat the Senior Cambridge exam there then I went to live with my father in Point Fortin and went to school and did the Higher Certificate at St Joseph's Convent in San Fernando.

I am probably the only person who attended those three schools all different learning environments and as a result developed a very interesting network for my later life. I am also one of the first graduates of the Cipriani Labour College

**10 What are your favourite meal or dish/food and drink?**

I love local food, cassava any how, callalou in any form. I love mangoes, sapodillas, avocados, guava juice. I do not eat a lot of meat and I try to eat healthy and stay away from fat, sugar, salt and processed food like white flour.

**11 What advice would you give to young people of Trinidad and Tobago?**

Try to determine your purpose in life early and get as much information about the things in which you are interested so that you can make good choices and be the best you can. Read a lot. Learn to express your feelings appropriately. You also need to be a well-rounded individual and get involved in positive activities with like-minded people.

**12 If you could dine with anyone in history who would it be and what would you like the dinner conversation to be about?**

Barack Obama. How to change the political environment so that it benefits ordinary people.

**13 If you could hire any**

**singer or band to perform for you, who would you pick? Which is your favourite all time local song and by whom?**

Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra; Shadow's "Poverty is Hell."

**14 What is your greatest fear in life?**

In a sense I am fearless. I try to meet any challenge the best way I can and if it cannot be overcome I let go.

**15 What daily motto/credo do you live by and in three words, your recipe for success?**

I do the best I can every day; my power comes from the GOD in me. LIVE AND LOVE.

**16 What was the most difficult decision you ever had to make?**

Can't think of any. I try to anticipate things that may be troublesome and have a plan of how to deal with them one way or the other.

**17 Which of your accomplishments do you rate as the most satisfying and memorable?**

I have seen my four children through their tertiary education and mostly settled in their chosen

careers. Most of my accomplishments are the result of joint actions so I am really proud of my networking and collaboration skills and being able to do a lot with very little.

**18 What are your most prized possessions: one tangible, one intangible?**

Tangible, my home of 44 years in Diamond Vale. Intangible, my friends and loved ones.

**19 If you had to solve the ills that prevail in TT what would you do?**

I would encourage greater community organising and sharing. I would encourage greater participation by women and girls in decision-making at all levels: home, community, national, regional and international. I would promote greater understanding of gender and power relations in our society.

**20 What advice would you give to the country's leaders to create a better society?**

Listen to the people and be more transparent in their decisions that affect people and in the distribution of the resources of the people. They also need to be more aware and provide greater protection for the weak and underprivileged, especially children. Abuse of children by people with power over them has to be stopped.



HAZEL BROWN