

# Chairman & CEO's Tribute Delivered at the Thanksgiving Service for Arlene Lym on April 2, 2011

## Tribute to Arlene Lym

Arlene Lym joined GraceKennedy on the 1st of December 1980 at the age of 18, straight out of Alpha Commercial College, and before that the Convent of Mercy Academy, both fondly known as Alpha. Her application form, filled out in her beautifully clear handwriting, unassumingly states her shorthand speed at 100 words per minute and typing at 52 words per minute – an early sign of her budding competence. She started as Secretary to one of our Sales Managers, Tony Wright, and subsequently became Secretary to Stephanie Belcher, one of our HR Managers in September 1983.

In 1987, my then Administrative Assistant, Annette Robotham, was promoted to Office Manager. After advertising internally and interviewing candidates, I chose Arlene to work with me. Tony Wright commented “Doug, you’ve got one of the best.” He was right!

The traits I noted in that first interview blossomed into the pillar of quiet strength with whom I had the joy to work with for over 23 years. In that initial interaction, I was struck by her quiet serenity, her unpretentiousness, her soft spoken voice and her superb accuracy in her dictation and typing tests!

Arlene loved her work. She applied herself to any task with diligence and determination. In fact, whenever we discussed her future career, she would always say, “Mr Orane, I’m happy doing what I do now and want to continue.” Stephanie Belcher, her former boss, wrote this a few days ago – “She never wanted to become a Manager; she felt she was too shy and retiring for that; but she was a Manager – she always strove to be the best she could be.” And was she a Manager! She managed me in her own quiet way!

An immeasurable part of what I have been able to accomplish has been because of Arlene. She would have everything prepared for my activities in advance. Whatever I needed done I would tell her only once, and I knew it would be done accurately and on time, without a reminder from me.

She was completely confidential, an indispensable prerequisite for working in her position. This quality also endeared her to others over time, as they now tell me she became their confidante and advisor.

She was always willing to go the extra mile, manifested by her working whatever hours were needed in the evenings and weekends to complete our tasks and meet our deadlines. A most memorable case, not only for me, but also in GraceKennedy's history was the night of 31st October 1997. On that night, after protracted negotiations, we finalised the agreement to purchase all the international trademark rights to the Grace brand. Our Attorney and Director, Chris Bovell, myself and Arlene were ensconced in the offices of DunnCox on Duke Street until the agreement was signed, just before midnight; the ultra reliable Arlene was there to type the documents and finalise all the administrative arrangements, before a deadline of midnight.

Arlene had a generosity of spirit, a kindness that was remarkable. It is what has made many, including grown men like me, cry over the past week. It was the trait mentioned over and over by the many GraceKennedy colleagues who have been paying their tributes to her on our internal social website.

Arlene had the uncanny ability to put people at ease on their first encounter, whether in person or on the phone. She truly lived by our ethos "Grace – we care".

Courtney Campbell, my colleague Director, described his memories of her, thus: "she was the epitome of professionalism in dealing with all levels of staff and customers of all backgrounds. When handling a customer query or complaint, she received all the relevant details, ensured that she understood the problem and then if necessary,

followed through to ensure there was a satisfactory resolution – all this while being calm and not using her position to intimidate. She was always pleasant and calm – regardless of how anxious or uncertain you may have been prior to calling her office, Arlene could be depended on to calm you with a cheerful greeting and a viable solution. She was ultra reliable – willingly and consistently going the extra mile to deliver good service to her internal and external customers. I have met many good executive secretaries in my career, but Arlene was special.”

Arlene in her own quiet way embraced technology and mastered those areas relevant to her job. She was so willing to share her expertise with others. Martin Foster, one our Food credit officers, related this remarkable story of unsolicited generosity: “About 2 or 3 years ago I had to draft a standard letter to several of our customers. I knew there was a feature called “mail merge”... I just didn't know how to use it, so I went around the building trying to find someone to teach me. I finally succeeded when I solicited Arlene's assistance. I was struck by the warmth, the love, the gentleness and the sincerity with which she performed this act of kindness. I thought this was the end of this wonderful experience with Arlene. I was still at my desk way into the hours of the evening trying to get the task out of the way, when in walked Arlene. She wanted to know how I was progressing and if everything was going alright. For the most part it was...but there was something with which I was having an issue and I mentioned it to her. A few minutes later she again turned up unexpectedly with the solution!”

Arlene graduated from our Supervisory Management Programme in December of last year, and the project she took on was to create an electronic network for secretaries and administrative assistants to share best practices with each other. This was one of her many initiatives to improve efficiency and internal customer service.

In my years of association with Arlene, I was impressed by her fixity of purpose, and a dedication to two areas – her work at GraceKennedy and her family, particularly her daughter Kelly.

The only times Arlene responded that she couldn't do something immediately at work

was when she said "Mr Orane, I need to go for Kelly now." She would do that, but then, she would return to the office, oftentimes accompanied by Kelly who would do her homework in an enclave near to Arlene. She did everything she could to raise her daughter as a rounded person, and we see in Kelly that she has been exceedingly successful – a vibrant, serene, caring, soft spoken teenager – just like Mummy. Arlene's maternal instincts were spotted by another mother – my own – who said before her passing in 2008, "Arlene takes care of Doug – I am so grateful."

On the weekend following Arlene's death, while reflecting on all that had happened, I decided to write down my thoughts, which I later shared with my GraceKennedy colleagues as my tribute to Arlene. I have received feedback that persons found it helpful, so I would like to share these reflections with you today.

"In the first hour of learning of her murder on Friday morning, my immediate thoughts were 'How could this ever happen to such an innocent harmless person?' 'What kind of world are we living in?' 'Who could have committed such a vicious, senseless act?'

Then, I realized that my thoughts were leading me on a dead-end path to anger, resentment, suspicion, paranoia, and hatred.

I then turned away from these negative thoughts and instead reflected on what I remembered of Arlene and the over 23 years we worked together. She was calm and unflappable in every situation with her soft soothing voice. She had a Zen-like quality of serenity that surrounded her. She was always kind, generous, unselfish, and always willing to do whatever it took to meet our objectives and deadlines as a team working together. She was a friend to all, a confidante to many, and a devoted mother to her daughter. In fact, I now realize she was an angel here on earth.

What can I learn from Arlene's example? How can I celebrate her life?

Firstly, I decided on Saturday morning that many things that I have been wanting to do, and have not got around to, I would act on immediately. I could hear Arlene's soft voice gently whispering, 'Mr. Orane, remember you need to do this by that time.' So I

reached out the same day, and Sunday as well, to visit friends and family that I had planned to see and hadn't made contact with for some time. In addition, I put in motion activities that I'd thought about doing, but hadn't brought to finalization as yet.

Secondly, her incredible dedication to her work and her family has reinforced my resolve to pay tribute to her by working to make Jamaica the kind of country that we all want to live in and that she would have liked to have lived in herself. Some people have said to me that their confidence in our own country has been shaken. Mine has not; in fact the reverse has happened – this is my country to live in, to work in and to make a better place for family, friends, and all Jamaicans.

Thirdly, her fourteen year old daughter Kelly, whom I visited on Friday evening, was surrounded by her young friends from school and church. When I witnessed the effect that their cheerful countenance had in moving her from tears to smiles and then laughter, I said to myself, 'The human race is alive and well. Our future lies in our young Jamaicans. They have all the ingredients to make our country a better place.' It reinforced my dedication to help young people like Kelly who have a bright future, but have been touched by tragedy.

So, this Monday, the first working day of the week after Arlene's untimely death, I am not filled with depression, even as I grieve. Instead, I am energized to live my life happy for the gift of over 23 years of joyous times that I shared with Arlene, and motivated to apply the lessons I am learning now from her untimely separation from us.

She touched the lives of everyone with whom she came in contact, in a very special, memorable way.

I share my thoughts, feelings and actions with you in the hope that they will help you to celebrate the life of Arlene in your own personal way, as you start your first week at work without her physical presence. She was truly an angel on earth."

Friends, as we try to come to terms with this loss, let us reflect on how one person

could have touched so many with her kindness and warmth. We who are Arlene's colleagues and friends can seek to emulate her example by seeking to bring love and light wherever we are.

At this time we might be tempted to think that the forces of darkness are too overwhelming to resist, but Arlene's candle is very much alight. Let us use that flame to light our own candles to counter the forces of negativity in our country, by living the values we know can change the world. Arlene showed us how to do this. May we have the courage to honour her memory by shining our own light in this world.

Terrian Fraser, one of our young administrative officers, shared this poem with us, which epitomizes our feelings for Arlene:

We thought of you with love today.  
But that was nothing new.  
We thought about you yesterday.  
And days before that too.  
We think of you in silence.  
We often speak your name.  
Now all we have is memories.  
And your picture in a frame.  
Your memory is our keepsake.  
With which we'll never part.  
God has you in his keeping.  
We have you in our heart.

Arlene, we miss you, and we thank God for your wonderful time with us.

God bless you!