

VOLUNTARISM IS THE LIFE BLOOD OF THE SOCIAL SECTOR
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Greetings

For too long those members of society who were not granted the gifts of sight, hearing, speech and perfectly-formed bodies were considered children of a lesser god. They were seen as powerless, helpless and completely subject to their handicaps and thus totally dependent on their families and communities for support. They were stereotyped and labeled with no thought given to their individual personalities and talents.

A fortunate and outstanding few would prove these perceptions wrong and today we continue to enjoy the genius of Beethoven who wrote his most celebrated symphonies after becoming totally deaf. We are astounded and inspired by the words of Helen Keller, outstanding American author, political activist and lecturer who at 19 months old contracted a disease which rendered her both blind and deaf. Her potential was uncovered and nurtured by her extraordinary teacher Anne Sullivan.

In our own time we have experienced the music of Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. Ray Charles started to go blind at age five and was totally blind by age seven while Stevie Wonder was born blind. They proved themselves to be far from being children of a lesser god but individuals whose amazing talents have left the rest of the world spellbound.

All these individuals benefitted from the teaching and encouragement of persons who saw beyond their challenges and who believed that, at the very least, they could be functioning and self-sufficient members of their communities.

We in Jamaica were fortunate to elicit the interest and commitment of the English Anglican priest Rev. F. W. Gilby who, at age 74, on hearing of the hundreds of deaf people in Jamaica for whom there were no facilities, took up the challenge to come here to help them. In 1938 he, along with Jamaicans Lister Mair and Cecil Bosworth Facey, established the first Association for the Deaf and the Dumb in the British West Indies here in Jamaica. The growth of that seed, planted decades ago, has seen the development of an institution in which all Jamaicans can take pride and which has empowered hundreds of hearing-impaired citizens.

We applaud the work of your founders and you who continue to carry on this important task. As a result of your efforts and those of your counterparts in the Salvation Army who do the same for the blind... and the Mona Rehab centre for other physically challenged persons, we

no longer consider it unusual to find students with any of these challenges studying in our secondary and tertiary institutions or working beside us in the workplace.

Senator Floyd Morris, former junior minister in the Ministry of Labour and Social Security is only one example of high performing sight impaired persons in our society. Closer to home for us at GraceKennedy, Curtis Sweeny, also sight impaired, is a counselling psychologist with the Grace and Staff Community Development Foundation.

Key to the success of organizations such as the JAD is the voluntary effort of the community. Your own organization was built...and continues to operate... primarily on the voluntary effort and contributions of your supporters in Jamaica and overseas.

While Jamaica has enjoyed a long and strong tradition of voluntarism there have been times when we have had to question whether that tradition is waning. The theme of your celebrations, “Voluntarism is the Lifeblood of the Social Sector” on the surface celebrates the importance of voluntarism. However in examining it more closely I sense a, perhaps subconscious, suggestion that there is the danger of the diminishing of that life force in the sector. And, it is not an unfounded concern as individuals and corporations become more self-absorbed as the struggle for survival and success consumes us.

Eleven years ago GraceKennedy brought that question into the national sphere through the annual GraceKennedy Foundation Lecture entitled *Vision and Voluntarism: Reviving Voluntarism in Jamaica*, delivered by Professor Don Robotham.

Professor Robotham's first task in the lecture was to explore the concept of voluntarism and to design a definition which he believed was the best fit for the Jamaican context.

I quote him here: "voluntarism can be defined as any action or course of action, usually of a social or civic nature, prompted primarily by altruistic motives, from which the actor does not obtain wages, salary or profit and in which the beneficiaries are people who are not normally the volunteer's direct responsibility". You might well say that this is an obvious and accepted definition. However, the reality is that a lot of activity that masks itself as voluntarism is really carried out with the objective of getting something in return. Again, you might say "what is the importance of motive, surely equipment donated to a hospital does the job intended regardless of the motive of the donor". That is indeed true. However, there are implications for the sustainability of the sector. Where the motives are not pure, support will ebb and flow in keeping with the opportunity factor to the donor. Also without the proper motive volunteers will not approach their voluntary work with the appropriate attitude.

Professor Robotham pointed out that many agencies complained of volunteers who felt that because they were not charging they didn't

have to do their jobs in a professional manner. He emphasizes that, “Volunteers who do not have that extra moral or spiritual commitment from within are not likely to last long in today’s difficult social environment.”

Rev. Gilby’s decision to give up his retirement to come to Jamaica was totally in keeping with Professor Robotham’s definition of voluntarism.

There are many Jamaicans from all walks of life who embody that spirit of voluntarism. One such was the late Hon. Carlton Alexander who led GraceKennedy as Chairman and CEO between 1976 and 1989.

Mr. Alexander was a man of great generosity who was as respected for his work in the social sector as he was for his leadership of Jamaica’s private sector.

In my own personal life, I can attest to the joy of giving, whether of time, advise or money, being an invaluable experience for me. It is a manifestation of us demonstrating in our daily lives God’s commandment “Love thy neighbour”.

In your letter of invitation, you kindly referred to GraceKennedy’s charitable activities within the community. I am proud of our company’s well earned reputation in this regard. Our founding fathers Dr. John Grace, Fred W. Kennedy, Luis Fred Kennedy and James Moss-Solomon Snr. were guided by a strong social conscience which

led them to instill a philosophy of giving back to the community. It was, however, under the stewardship of Carlton Alexander that the company created a structure within which its charitable activities would be sustained.

In 1979 GraceKennedy established the Grace and Staff Community Development Foundation to work with the inner city communities adjoining our headquarters in downtown Kingston and surrounding our factories and other business places across Jamaica. This was a joint project between the management and staff where, for every dollar contributed by our staff, the company donated \$2. This formula continues to work well three decades later.

In addition to their financial contributions, our employees volunteer to teach extra classes at our homework centre on Tower Street, and we have had some excellent results. More of our students are qualifying to enter tertiary institutions and some have received scholarships to universities abroad.

The Foundation also helps to ensure regular attendance at school by assisting students with school fees, books and other expenses. Other programmes include counseling services for the students and their families, and a mentorship programme which sees staff members being assigned as mentors to students.

The GraceKennedy Foundation, which administers our scholarship and national educational programmes, was established in 1982. Currently

the Foundation awards five scholarships annually, tenable at the University of the West Indies, the University of Technology and the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts. The Foundation also provides a bursary to students of Calabar and St. Andrew High schools in memory of two of its former directors, Adrian Wallace and Faustine Sharp.

Through the Foundation, GraceKennedy also funds two professorial chairs at the University of the West Indies — the S. Carlton Alexander Chair in Management Studies and the James Seivright Moss-Solomon Chair in Environmental Management.

Since Carlton Alexander assumed patronage of Child Month in the 1960s, successive Chairmen of GraceKennedy have continued to serve as patron. For my part, I consider it a privilege to be a part of the Child Month initiative as it has allowed me to meet many outstanding Jamaicans in the child services sector.

This speech is not intended as a list of the charitable programmes of the company but more to serve as an example of what corporate Jamaica can do in the area of voluntarism. Of course, several other organizations in the private sector have also been making significant contributions in their areas of interest and, like us, are happy to share their resources with the social sector.

I would like to commend the initiative which saw the establishment of the National Registry of Volunteers, a collaborative effort between the Council of Voluntary Social Services, the Environmental Foundation

of Jamaica, the Social Development Commission and the University of the West Indies. The overall objective of the registry is to establish contacts between potential volunteers and those institutions which can benefit from their efforts. This is a major step in the right direction as there are so many people and groups who want to volunteer but are uncertain as to how to go about it and where to target their particular talent.

I am somewhat concerned however that many of the institutions that are the targets of these efforts are, often, not ready to fully take advantage of the resources that volunteers can offer. The consequence is that the skills of the volunteers are not used to the best advantage and so, persons may become frustrated and drop out of the programme.

What we need to appreciate is that with the growth of the sector the management of volunteers has become a discipline in itself. It is not simply a matter of institutions asking for help, the institutions have to prepare themselves to accept the help they are being given.

Before closing I would like to look quickly at two areas that are in dire need of volunteers because the Government is simply not able to keep up with the cost of human resources needed to man these sectors. Yet, ironically these sectors enjoy a large pool of potential volunteers. I refer to the health and education sectors. Teachers and nurses are required to retire at age 60. At age 60 these professionals are still healthy and fit with the capacity to contribute much more to their country. I do believe that there are many among these retirees who would be willing to give some hours each week to help to improve the

services in these sectors. This would need careful planning and administration but the returns that could be gained would be well worth the effort.

Another largely untapped pool of volunteers is the population of returning residents. These Jamaicans chose to come home because they love the country of their birth and want in their retirement years to play their part in its development. They want to experience a sense of involvement in their country. I know that some groups have formed themselves into organizations and are already taking on community development projects. But, I believe that their skills and experience could be harnessed by organizations such as the Jamaica Association of the Deaf.

There may even be retired Jamaicans who continue to live overseas who would be happy to spend a few weeks in Jamaica each year to assist a project that they find interesting. Again the health and education sectors seem to be areas that could benefit from the assistance of our returning residents and our retirees in the diaspora.

Professor Robotham, in his lecture, pointed to four peaks of voluntarism in Jamaica. They were the period of the abolition of the slave trade and Emancipation from slavery; the period of the rise of Black nationalism under Marcus Garvey in the 1920s; the nationalist period of the late 1930s and the Socialist period of the 1970s. I think this time of global financial and economic crisis is ripe for the generation of another outpouring of voluntarism. The public, private and social sectors need to come together to forge a path going forward

in promoting an awareness of the importance and need for voluntarism and to inspire those Jamaicans who are on the fence to become volunteers.

In concluding I will share with you another quote from Professor Robotham's lecture which, though 11 years old, remains relevant today.

“We must not forget that entire areas of our national life, especially at the community level, were in many cases built by voluntary effort. Today, sports such as football and athletics, would cease to exist in Jamaica were it not for that small band of dedicated persons. In other areas such as drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, youth activities, adolescent experiences, literacy and homework classes, professionals and volunteers together play a critical role. These people are the true heroes of our time, toiling against great odds and without material reward for higher values and purposes in an often callous and indifferent society. We owe it to them to take practical steps to support and strengthen their work and to ensure that the vision and determination which they display are extended into a national vision in which all Jamaicans can share and be united.”

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.