

## **CORA BELLE, Tuesday September 18, 2012**

*A woman in harmony with her spirit is like a river flowing. She goes where she will without pretense and arrives at her destination prepared to be herself and only herself. --Maya Angelou*

When history is analysed and recorded into books, the lives and survival struggles of the vast majority of the women and men and children who made that history are not mentioned, and those lives are forgotten by all except those who knew them. The struggles that women wage, and often lead, are especially invisible. Today we are saying goodbye and commemorating the life and struggle of one such woman. Cora Eslyn Belle is one of the unsung heroes of this country and those of us who knew her, who worked with her, who were raised and helped and supported by her would do well to take the many examples of her life forward in the relationships we build with others.

I say that Cora is a Guyanese hero first, because of the work she did in caring for her children and other family members, and the way that she did that work. Cora Belle (as you know) gave birth to almost a full own cricket team – Eon, Terrence, Dexter, Nicola, Chrislyn, Gillian, Simone, Declan and Keoma, and she raised these and others – Nickeeza and Latoya to adulthood. Cora’s team did not play cricket, but she raised all its members to grow into women and men who in turn, help build loving families and communities.

We must know that in her life, Cora experienced a series of hardships and betrayals, and she was a hero because she never let herself be beaten down by the hardships or grow bitter by the betrayals small and big. After each one, she dusted herself off, and pressed on with the business of raising her family. One of the unusual things about Cora Belle is that all her children called her Cora – and conventional wisdom suggests that this calling your mother “full mouth” is disrespectful; but everyone who knows this family knows that there was no semblance of disrespect; there was only love and an easiness that we would wish more families could have. Nowadays there is much discussion about how damaging the single mother family is – and I wish that those so-called experts could have known Cora and her family.

Cora was one of the founders of Red Thread, and in the early days the groups were doing embroidery. Cora was lousy at embroidery, but she continued to attend the meetings because she was interested in the discussions. She eventually took charge of the group of women who set up the Red Thread laundry, and insisted on standards while she kept the younger women in order. There was nothing shy or retiring about Cora Belle, and she jumped at the chance to

become more involved in the outreach community education programme that Red Thread eventually developed. One of the many disagreements we had in the early days was Cora's insistence that she had no education, so she wanted to be trained as a social worker. My position was that she could probably train the social workers; but, the university organised a training programme for community activists, and there was Cora's chance to get her social work training. Well! One of the first topics done in this class was "family", and the experts worked very hard to convince Cora about the proper definition of family, but eventually were forced to accept that Cora brought into her family tree everyone she loved, and no book definition or university professor could tell her different – I believe I was one of the troublesome imports. I don't think I heard Cora speak about her lack of education after that experience, because that, and other programmes at which she represented Red Thread showed her that all the degrees and certificates in the world did not equip a person to understand her life, or the lives of the many thousands of grassroots women like her.

Though in the beginning she often said that she had no education, she was always the first to jump in and make others who were nervous and unsure of what to expect, comfortable and willing to participate. One of Cora's strengths – whether we were discussing social issues like violence or racism or teenage pregnancy, or we were talking about the economy – was her ability to draw on the experiences of her life to teach and clarify and when necessary, comfort, and within Red Thread she took on the responsibility of teaching the young and not so young women.

Cora's fear of crapaud and small boats was legendary but this did not stop her from leading some of our work to the interior regions. The other women in the group just knew that their job was to ensure there were no jumping, croaking creatures in the toilets or bathrooms, and in the small boats, they were to position themselves on either side of the Belle while she sat in the middle and prayed. Cora is known from Mahdia to Kwakwani, from Skeldon to Kato; from Supenaam to Charity and through the Pomeroun River, and in all those places and points in between she has made a difference to the lives of people she met.

From 1986 when Red Thread came into being we have struggled to sustain our work, managing to do so without money for extended periods (notwithstanding the rumours circulating that Red Thread was and is a wealthy organization), and this has been possible because grassroots women led by Cora felt that our work was important and were determined to press on regardless. I believe we have continued to press on through the many lean days and years in part because of Cora's Pomeroun experience. Remember Red Thread is not and has never been a group of well-to-do middle class women living on comfortable incomes. Our

community work has always been driven by extraordinary grassroots women who at best, struggle for the survival of their families; so in the Pomeroun, when we encountered entire families who were bonded to grants, who could never pay off the grant shop for the food and supplies they credited, who had no clothes and often no food, who slept exposed to the elements, Cora's declaration to the other Red Thread women who were working in the river, and later to all the others in Red Thread, was that as poor as she was, she had now truly encountered poverty, and nobody in Red Thread was again to complain about being poor. We must work to fight poverty, yes; complain about your own poverty, no.

With her children all grown and independent Cora entered a new phase of her life, and decided to get married; and herein lies the biggest and most hurtful betrayal of her life. The silence of those who knew that she was marrying a drug-addicted person was the first level of betrayal, and Cora who took her marriage vows very seriously did as much as any human being could to support him to overcome his addiction. The second betrayal here was from those who enabled his continued drug use and pushed Cora to take responsibility for him and his misdeeds knowing that he was betraying her trust. In the last few years of her life, trapped between the betrayals and her inability to dismiss her vows, Cora distanced herself emotionally from the reality that was unbearable. This a period when those who knew and loved Cora were able to return in some small measure the care and love that she lavished on all who encountered her.

I say Cora is a Guyanese hero because she never allowed herself to be limited by her material circumstances, she never surrendered to self-pity, she set out to enrich the lives of all those she met, and even though she had her own cricket team, she proceeded through her life with a generosity of spirit, adopting and being adopted by children and adults alike – the mother of all. Her home was always a refuge for those who needed one.

Red Thread is poorer for her leaving. We are all poorer for her departure, and we could do no better than to take forward the example of her life – treat everyone around you with consideration; give care when it is needed; know that however impoverished you are, someone out there is even more impoverished - and is your sister or brother. Walk good now, Cora Belle. All of us in and around Red Thread but especially Joycelyn, Halima (whose own mother died just two days before Cora) Vanessa, Wintress, Andaiye and I say goodbye with so much respect, and so much love. Walk good.