

Chapter 7: Trinidad and Tobago: 1990 - 2000

Coming to Trinidad, I thought, would be like or at least follow the patterns set up by our other island moves. This however was not the case. For the first time it was just Frank and I. No Judy, Lynn, Grandma or even our dog Robbie. We did of course come with our worldly possessions including the 35 boxes of books but we always travelled with those.

Usually we had to make our own way, but here, we were picked up at the airport by a young Bahá'í, Ashmeed Edo. We had met him before at the Thorpe's house in Roseville, California where he had been visiting them. Ashmeed is a wonderful man, a strong Bahá'í and a good friend to have.

My first impression of the island was being impressed with the long straight highways. Trinidad is 50 x 37 miles, St. Lucia is 27 x 14, Barbados is 21 x 14 and St. Thomas is 14 x 3.

He took us to the Thorpe's house which was situated in La Romain which is in the Southern part of the country. It was also in the same Bahá'í Community as Ashmeed. It was a lovely, large house with a view of the sea from the porch.



Over the years I found that this culture was very different than the other islands I had served on. One the main factors for this was the makeup of the background of the people. 40 % were of African descent and 40 % East Indian descent with the remaining 20 % being European, Middle Easterners, Chinese, and mixtures thereof. This meant that traditions varied, such as weddings and funerals. One thing though, as Trinidadians became Baha'is they easily changed. The photos of a Hindu wedding and a Bahá'í wedding shown below give an excellent example:



Phillip and Lynn Heeralal

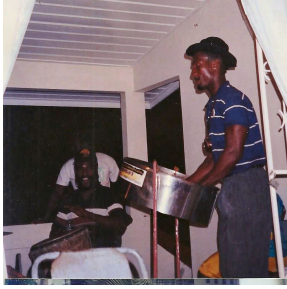
Funerals though gave us a start. The first one we attended was for a great Bahá'í, Ramkay Ramjattan. All was the same until the last of the funeral and they began to cover up the coffin with dirt while we were still there. Frank and I looked at each other, thinking "what is this?" Neither of us had seen a casket lowered into the ground before. Our experience was that the funeral ended before the casket was put into the ground.

Another funeral we attended was also of a Bahá'í. A member of one of the families rushed up to me and quietly asked "Which direction should the feet face?" Fortunately I had just recently read the relevant passage from the Bahá'í Writings on this subject.

This was also the first time I had seen a shop selling "Bake and Shark"



The steel pan was a musical instrument I had never seen before. I loved it, has a great sound!



This photo was taken on our front porch.

Another example of culture differences for me with my North American background is in the local expressions in all of the islands we had lived in. Two examples:

1) "I wouldn't mind".

This means "I would like to do this". But the expression itself can be taken in different ways, and also not understood. A good example of this happened during one of my trips to Haifa, Israel at the Bahá'í World Centre. I was waiting for the other Bahá'ís when a young Persian man came flying by me. He glanced at me, saw an older lady, and came to a sliding stop. He said to me "I am giving a ride in my car to a few Bahá'ís up to the next meeting. Would you like to come with us?" This meant a lovely drive instead of a hard climb up a steep hill. I said to him "I wouldn't mind". His eyeballs sorta rolled in his head. He knew what the words meant, but not their meaning. I saw this and promptly said "That would be very nice, thank you." He beamed, told me where to wait and was gone.

2) "Just now".

This can be a very deceptive phrase. One eventually comes to realize what it means; certainly not now, maybe not in an hour, but sometime today.

Another big change for me in Trinidad was the number of active local believers. The other islands always had a solid but small core of local Bahá'ís. Here there were many from both East Indian and African backgrounds and taking part in the activities of the Faith. This was great.

The only thing I could see that was not, in my opinion, not as balanced as it should be dealt with Bahá'í Administration. With the large number of capable local Bahá'is I was surprised that weren't more local Bahá'is on the National Spiritual Assembly. Instead there were five Persian pioneers. It did take a while for this to change, but it did change and Ashmeed Edoe was the first new one who was elected to the National Assembly which in turn led to a National Assembly with a majority of Trinidadian Bahá'is on it.

A good example of the caliber of the Trinidadian Bahá'is were the awards given by government to two local believers, Dr. Harry Collymore and Mansingh Amarsingh in 1999. It was a special meeting with the awards being presented by the President of Trinidad and Tobago, Noor Hasanali. Dr. Collymore received the Trinity Cross (the highest award) for community service and Mansingh Amarsingh the Humming Bird medal for sports.

Our first ride in one of the local transportation options were taxis which ran regularly on the roads. You went out on the road, waited until one came, flagged it down, and you were on your way. The first one we got into, the driver turned around and stated "See, I have straight hair just like yours." As I found out later there was still a sense of division between the two dominant backgrounds. This extended into marriage, neighborhoods, friendships and the political realm. It has, however, gotten better over the years and as far as I could tell did not extend into the Bahá'í community.

Our first visitors were Dr. Fereydoon and Mrs. Marouk Rahimi. They were Persian pioneers in the country and lived in the same Bahá'í community as we now did. They brought us a gift of a luscious looking watermelon. Dr. Rahimi also came with a request from the National Assembly that I serve on the National Teaching Committee and the Institute Board. What was he saying! Remember I am now 71 years old; have just participated in the packing up of our house and the move to Trinidad including all the arrangements that such a move involves. I knew how much work a National Teaching Committee involved but wasn't sure of the Institute Board, whatever that was. Politely as I could I asked to be able to rest up a bit before jumping into Bahá'í activities such

as those he was requesting. His wife agreed with me, and that started our friendship.

One of the first things that we did was to meet with the National Spiritual Assembly. The National Bahá'í Centre was in North of the country, in the capital city of Port of Spain. As we entered into the meeting room, the members of the National Assembly stood up to greet us. Boy, I was seriously impressed. I remember thinking this is a classy National Assembly. The gesture has remained with me

After we had more or less settled in I decided not to accept the appointment to the National Teaching Committee but to work with the National Institute Board of Directors of Trinidad and Tobago. I had gotten more information on the work of this Board. I felt sure this was a solution to the follow up we had been looking for after the Mass Teaching period.

I attended my first meeting at Ann Marie and Ganesh (Bobby) Ramsahai's home who lived in the north-east of the island. I began to realize this island was going to mean a lot more travelling up and down in the country for me.

I was promptly elected the secretary...oh my, sure glad I rested up a bit first! Bobby who was the Auxillary Board Member joined the Board at a later date. While other personnel did change a bit I remained on it until we left Trinidad.



L to R: Pat Paccassi, Kathy Farabi, Marouk Rahimi, Ann Marie Ramsahai.

As you see this was a real diverse group, American, British, Persian and Trinidadian. It was a joy to work with them.

The Institute Process here was a lot further along than it had been in St. Lucia. We now started having the residential nine day institutes covering both Book 1, Reflections on the Life of the Spirit and Book 3, Teaching Children's Classes.

As we lived in this big house it followed that the institutes were held there. One of the institutes had 18 attendees. Others were smaller.



Frank was not involved with the institute process per se, but was always very supportive. He would remain in the back during sessions and appear during break times. The boys who attended loved Frank. When he was in the back on the computer they would all flock back there to see what he was doing. One time, as they were there, he somehow popped into an adults only site and naked women jumped onto the screen. I'm not sure who was more surprised, but I sure know Frank was more mortified. I suspect the boys didn't mind at all.

While all the institutes to me were great, some always stand out. However, one ended with a negative feeling that wasn't so great. In Trinidad there is a big local tradition called a "Camp". It usually was for youth and at the end of it, the tradition said that one could let go and have some fun, at someone else's expense of course. I knew this and at our orientations was very clear as to the difference between the camp and the institute and that the end of camp behavior was not acceptable at an institute, especially here in my home. However, at one of them, one of the boys who had been sent to this institute by someone else got the other boys together for a trick on the girls.

The girls all slept in the back room on mattresses on the floor. As we lived right next to the sea, the boys had been able to fill a large canvas bag with crabs! In the middle of the last night the boys released the crabs and sent them toward the back of the house. I

was awakened by loud and shrill screams from the girls in the back room. The crabs were crawling all over them.

I was furious! I got everybody up, but was so upset that I couldn't deal with them then. Lorna Bergner who was a visiting Ruhi Co-ordinate and tutor finished the institute with them before the sun came up. When I got up I shared with them my disappointment and dismay at the disrespect I felt they had showed towards me and my family at our home. I had them pack their things and wait on the porch until their rides home came. I hope I did make it clear I was speaking to the boys, not the girls.

One of the better ones was an institute where everyone studied hard and clever skits were made up by groups at the end relating to the material we had just studied.

One group started out with two boys hanging out at the corner. One of the boys had his shirt unbuttoned several buttons, and his belt unbuckled. Bella Edoe who was another tutor for the institute was sitting next to me for this skit. She and I looked at each other, with our eyebrows raised.

The skit continues with two of girls who are supposed to be teaching the Faith in the area pass by. They stop and proceed to give the boys a Bahá'í fireside. The boys nod but it's clear they are not overly impressed. So the girls politely say goodbye and start to leave. As they turn around and walk away, one of them says to them in this silky tone of voice, "Oh baby, don't move away so fast".

At this point Bella and I both lost it, we could not stop laughing. It was so unexpected and so out of character for these boys it was really funny.

This is the group for that Institute.



L to R: Bella Edoe, Pat Paccassi, Kevin Brisport, Christopher Rooplal, Kimraj Badree, Joanna Greenidge, Mary Greenidge, Dwayne Burriss. Dwight Burriss, Shoba Maharaj.

It was at this institute that the Burriss twins, Dwight and Dwaine, first became involved with the institute activities of the Faith. Their Father, Stephen was one of the Burriss family who were early believers in Tobago, with their Mother being a Christian. The family did have the children involved in both religious activities. These included Christian Sunday School and the Bahá'í Feasts, Holy Day celebrations and etc.

As the boys were now 15, I kept after Stephen to have the boys come to this institute. Dhanika, their younger sister, being just 10 years of age, was not eligible to attend. She, being put out by this, solved her dilemma by telephoning the house at least twice a day during our break times. At some other time, she faced her Mother, who was not a Bahá'í on the subject of religion by saying to her, "Ms. Burriss, you can send me to Sunday school all you want, but I am a Bahá'í."

I'm sure getting the boys to attend wasn't easy as this was also the time of a big sports event and they were great fans. However, one way or the other, they came. Within a day or two, the boys began to say things about the Faith such as "Well we should do that.." or other similar remarks indicating they now were identifying themselves as Bahá'is. At the end of the institute and the subsequent teaching project in a nearby village, one of the boys was heard to remark "I can't believe I didn't even miss TV!"

So many lessons other than the required syllabus were learned at the institutes. One of the times there was a young man invited who as it turned out was nowhere near the reading level it was felt was necessary to do these courses. There was a little grumbling about the slower pace we now had to go at. But he was here so I had him sit next to me the whole time and traced the words being read with my finger. Day by day his reading improved. By the end of the 9 days, his reading level had increased by at least 3 levels. His spiritual insights however were amazing. The grumbling stopped and he was getting lots of help.

Another time it had to do with music. Classical music was not the norm in the West Indies. It was my habit to play classical music in the morning. I continued to do so even at the institutes. It would play softly through the morning routine until it was time to start the prayers when I would then turn it off. One morning I was starting to put the music on when I noticed two of the girls sitting on the couch near me. I told them I was going to play the classical music now. Yes, they said, we have come to listen.

At the same institute one of the boys became really interested in the music as well and asked questions about it. I ended up playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony all the way though and he stayed listening all the way.

One of the most popular extra activities that we did at one of the institutes was a skit entitled "Wizard of Justice". It was an adaption of the movie "Wizard of Oz" with the slant being Bahá'í and the characters having to get to the Universal House of Justice for advice.



But the same theme and characters were used. We dressed up in costumes as well as we could and really got in to it. I was the wicked witch of the West. (Me melting in the photo) I have never minded making a fool

of myself and really hammed up this part. The kids loved it, they screamed and clapped and laughed.



A great meeting was held in this house at the occasion of the visit of our spiritual Mother, Maxine Roth. The photo is us being silly. We wanted the gathering to be a fun time, so Maxine put together a game they had done at her pioneering post in Venezuela. There were families with three persons, a papa, moma and baby with all the last names sounding very similar; EG: Bissle, Fizzle, Dizzle,

Mizzle, you get the idea.

Small pieces of paper were made for the name in each complete family IE: papa Bissle, momma Bissle, baby Bissle. Everyone was asked to pick a paper out of a bowl and find their family. So here are lots of Bahá'is moving around talking to everyone trying to complete their family. When they did find each other they were to be seated in this order; Papa, Mama, Baby.

We announced the prizes for the first three complete families; third prize was you didn't have to stay and help clean up, second prize was you didn't have to help do the dishes afterwards, first prize was you got to pick who did clean up and do the dishes!!

The winners;





At the institutes we also made an attempt to finish them with an activity relevant to the course. One of the ways was to do a small teaching trip into a nearby village. We would call upon the believers in the area and have the kids practice the parts of the course where one is out teaching. It also included sometimes putting up a display and talking to people who would stop and chat with us.



We also went to a nearby ongoing children's class and have our newly trained tutors give the class from Book 3. The children in these classes had, of course done, this material many times with other new trainees but they were always patient and polite.

Some of the special other activities that we did in Trinidad included a Walk in the village part of La Romain which was the Local Spiritual Assembly area we lived in. One time we planned a big event and asked the Bahá'ís from everywhere to join us. We started at one end of the village, La Romain. We walked all the way through carrying signs and plaques and also brought a steel pan for one of the men to play while we were there.

It was lots of fun. Probably didn't result into any new Bahá'ís but everyone sure got to know we were there. The photos below reflect the scope and support we got:



One night after a meeting at the house some of the Bahá'ís lingered, and we got talking about the musical talent in the Bahá'í community. As the conversation continued we began to realize we could start a group that would showcase these divergent talents. The idea grew and was eventually brought together by one of the Trinidadian believers, Rhonda Holder (now Lewis). She became the director and one of the main stars as she had a beautiful singing voice. As there were varied talents in the group such as violin solos, dramatic readings, skits and a singing choir, it was called the Bahá'í Performing Theater.

This group met every Saturday at the Bahá'í Centre in the South of Trinidad. As there were members from North, this required traveling back and forth for them. But every Saturday, everyone showed up. It was not only a very talented group, but loving and united as well. The youngest member was a child named Ellie Rooplal. She was included as a voice like hers was not to be turned down no matter how old she was.

The group got really good, with a varied program and somehow we managed to get outfits for everyone. There was no funding available other than what we all tried to raise. We had T-Shirts printed and we sold those.



I even took a bunch back to the United States on one of my visits and sold them there. It got to be known up there as the Bahá'í Hamburger-T-Shirts as the design did, indeed, if one thought about it, look like there was a hamburger in the

middle of the shirt.

We finally felt confident enough to start with public performances at other local centres. The first one was held at the Creative Arts Centre in San Fernando. We invited the whole Bahá'í community and asked them to bring their friends. The house was packed and it turned out to be a very receptive audience. Stephen Burris and I acted as the hosts for the night. We gave a short introduction about the history of the group and what people should expect to see and hear for the evening. We also must have looked a bit strange. Stephen is quite tall, and quite dark. I am quite short and quite white. He wore a white outfit including our hamburger T-Shirt and white pants. I wore a black hamburger T-Shirt and black pants. We thought we looked lovely and hoped the intended contrasts were noted.

The nerves and jitters we all felt before it started vanished as the curtain rose. They were great, it all went smoothly. It was a real success! Boy, were we happy!! It was filmed and a copy remains and is posted on YouTube <https://youtu.be/qRHppEoiGC8>.

Another public performance we gave was at the University of the West Indies. We used their large auditorium, sent out invitations, put up posters, and hoped for the best. We were once again very pleased with the turn out and the reception of the audience.

I began to have visions of them getting good enough to think about traveling as a group to other Bahá'í communities as a way of attracting larger audiences to Bahá'í activities. Unfortunately this was not to be. It wasn't too long after the performance at the University that the group was made into a National Bahá'í Committee. Its leadership also changed and it did not survive all the changes. But it was sure fun while it lasted.

Another change for me in Trinidad was that there were three Bahá'í Centres in the country. The National Bahá'í Centre was in Port of Spain in the North.



The Bahá'í Centre for South was in Palmyra. This centre served the surrounding Bahá'í communities and the land had been donated by Dr. Harry Collymore.



The Centre was used a great deal. The events and/or sessions were always well attended.



This is a photo of some of the lovely Bahá'ís in the Palmara area: L to R: _____, Merle Wilshire, _____, Jaitun Abdul.

The other Centre was in Paharry, which is in the North East of the country. It was this Centre where I had first begun to work actively for the Faith in Trinidad. Its caretakers were Dollie and Ramkay Ramjattan. Ramkay was a devoted and active Bahá'í. Every day he would pack up his Bahá'í materials and take off to teach the Faith in the area. He would touch each house and if there was an interest he would teach them the Faith. If there was no interest, he went to the next house. This was a man I wanted to work with. Frank and I would drive the long drive, stay several days, go out with Ramkay during the day and have meetings at night.

One of the most touching things I can remember about working at this Centre had to do with a young boy, not quite in his teens yet. His home life was awful. He attended a meeting or two. I then invited him to come to one of the residential institutes we held there. His reading level was very low and he had a lot of trouble memorizing anything. But after the night session I would work with him to memorize the prayer "Is there any Remover of Difficulties save God". It took the entire nine days he was there to accomplish this, but we were both very happy when he did learn it. A few years later I saw him once again, he ran up to me and said the whole prayer! God is good.

Trinidad is one part of a two part nation. The second part is the island of Tobago which in my estimation, is more like what I think of as a Caribbean island. That is, it is not as commercially developed as Trinidad. The pace is slower, so there is more time to chat and relax. The first Bahá'í on either island was Shelia Burris. Peter McLaren came there on a teaching trip. He asked the taxi

driver to take him to a place that was hard to get to. He made this request as it had been his experience as well as other Bahá'í teachers, was that the further one got from the capital, the more likely one could find those interested in religion. He was then taken to a village called Parlatuvier which, indeed, was a long way, by island standards, from the capital of Scarborough. He saw this young girl on the road and had the driver stop. He introduced himself, began telling her about the Faith. She was very interested, accepted the Faith and brought him to her home. The father was also very receptive, accepted the Faith and told his family to do the same which they did. Many of the family have remained steadfast as well as some of their next generation.

The Bahá'í community in Tobago is smaller, but just as devoted as the one in Trinidad. Our Institute Board decided to hold a weekend institute and asked Kathy Farabi and I to go and tutor the day-time sessions.

We were housed in a comfortable house that was not near any other houses. This helped with the ambiance needed for study and concentration. However it also meant at night the two of us were pretty isolated. One night after everyone had left and we were sitting on the porch, a voice came from nowhere it seemed, saying "Good Night". We looked and there stood a man neither of us knew.

We probably both held our breath for a second until he said he had been invited to the meeting but had to work and could he come now. Going back to my experience on my global trip about trusting ones instincts and inner guidance, I thought for a minute, felt no sign of danger and said "Sure, come in." Kathy gave a start but didn't say anything, so he came onto the porch. We ended up having a really productive time with him. It was, once again, where one has to trust one's own instinct and guidance. It is, after all, one of the things we say prayers for but it's not an easy lesson to learn.

Two of the nicest compliments I ever received came from this island. One was after a nine day institute. We were doing the normal wrap up with the whole group. Bobby who was one of the

other tutors and the Auxillary Board Member said to the group "We have been here in their home for 9 days, this is their home, not a Bahá'í Centre, and yet not once have they made us feel uncomfortable".

The other came from one of the older youth Navid Lancaster. One day we were sitting on my porch chatting. He asked me about pioneering. One of the things I said was that the only thing I regretted was that I had not been able to see my grandsons who lived in the United States, grow up. He looked at me, put his hand on his heart and said "I am one of your grandsons."

Two more very fond memories happened the night we left Trinidad. Bella Edoe, who was married to Ashmeed and now one of my dearest friends, asked if she could have a going away party for us. I agreed but with the condition that no "Going away speeches" be given. Lynn, Frank and I finished the last of the packing just after dark. We had to hurry to the Bahá'í Centre in Palmyra as this was where the gathering was being held. We drove up and the Centre parking area was full and overflowing. The national Bahá'í community had come! I was so touched and for once didn't know what to say.

For that night the youth had planned a surprise for me. They had resurrected the "Wizard of Justice" skit as a going away performance for me. They looked fantastic, they were all in appropriate costumes, and the Tin Man was even wrapped completely in tin foil!

Just as the party was winding up, I went outside and the youth followed me. We chatted a bit and when it came to say goodnight, one of the youth ran up and gave me a big hug. This triggered the others who immediately lined up for their hug. This still brings tears to my eyes when I think of it.

A word about our leaving Trinidad; this was not our choice. We wanted to stay and did everything we could think of to make it happen, including having a glowing recommendation from Dr. Collymore who was well known and respected in the nation. Frank

especially made efforts which were not the norm. I usually took care of things like that, but one day, he even called the appropriate Minister of Government to intervene for us. It was not to be.

We were also unsure as to where to go. After exploring what seemed to be all the available options, we decided to return to St. Lucia where our permanent residency seemed to be still valid. Going backwards had never been our pattern but it was the only open option. We decided to make a test run, as our Permanent Resident status was still valid in our passports. We booked a flight to St. Lucia and had no trouble entering the country.

We then made all the arrangements, packing, shipping etc and flew into the Vigie Airport in St. Lucia. We chose the Residents line as opposed to Visitors. We showed our passports to the Immigration Officer, who looked at them, turned to us, smiled and said "Welcome home".