



Dr. Clayton Shillingford - A Life in Development Work

By Gabriel Christian, Esq.

In 1972 I had entered the first form of the Dominica Grammar School (DGS) and got to enter the world of laboratories for the first time.

Amidst microscopes, Bunsen burners, Petri dishes, display cases with snakes, rabbits, and other fauna in formaldehyde we learnt of the universe of atoms, molecules and the principles of osmosis and photosynthesis.

With a lab for physics, chemistry and biology, the DGS had the best laboratory construct on island; but we knew little about those whose efforts made for that reality. There was no plaque, no sign, and no history which spoke to the early days of lab science on island.

So, in the Spring of 2011, as I as looked at the athletic looking seventy plus Dr. Clayton Shillingford as he reclined on my couch from a long day of meetings in Washington, DC, I asked him questions about his days at our alma mater, the DGS.

Founded in 1893 as the first high school for boys on island, it was modeled on the old English public schools such as Eton and Harrow. My class in 1972 was the first which admitted girls.

Tell me about your days at the DGS, I asked Dr. Shillingford? He smiled, and said nothing for a while. Then, slowly and clearly, and in a manner most profound he stated: You remember the labs at DGS?

Much of that was my work. When I came back from the University of the West Indies, I was the science master there in 1962. Dr. Shillingford's comment stoked my interest enough, that I took my pad out and thought it best to record his memory of that time.

I thought it wise to plumb the depths of his memories and the nature of his value system which had seen him lobby hard for Dominica – and indeed the wider Caribbean – at a time when most retirees are content to lay back and rest.

That day, Dr. Shillingford had just attended the Global Diaspora Leadership Forum, held at the US State Department under the auspices of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Having served as a customs officer, science teacher, cricket team captain, head of the research team with the Jamaica Banana

Board, earning a PhD in plant science from the University of Illinois, Shillingford had finally retired from his position as a scientist at Dupont Labs in Delaware.

For ten years (2001-2011) Dr. Shillingford had served as the first President of the Dominica of Arts and Sciences – a unique online academy designed to gather the island’s human resources for development at home and abroad.

Spurred on by the efforts of co-founder, and webmaster, Raglan Riviere, Shirley Allan, Dr. Thomson Fontaine, Dave Shillingford, Dr. Peter St. Jean, Frank Watty, Dr. Leroy Mitchell, Claudette Loblack, Dr. Samuel Christian, and many others, the academy had raised approximately \$10 million Eastern Caribbean Dollars in cash and kind for the betterment of Dominica over those years.

Now, President Emeritus of the DAAS, Shillingford declined the ease of a well earned retirement and busied himself promoting the best of Dominica. His last effort as President of DAAS was to formalize a partnership with the Smithsonian Institute’s Museum of Natural History which recently completed its second summer research internship (2011) program with the Dominica State College (DSC).

In that program, two students and a professor from the DSC worked under the direction of Dr. John Kress of the Smithsonian in cataloging and studying some of the 5,000 plant samples from Dominica stored in the Smithsonian’s herbarium collection. To better understand the man, I thought it best to ask him some questions about his life:

Where were you born, Dr. Shillingford?

I was born on April 25, 1936 in Roseau, Dominica. I was the son of estate owner and business man Thomas Heskeith Shillingford – a descendant of the British planter class and Gladys Phillip, a black woman of modest origin.

Where did you attend school?

I went to the St. Joseph's School – a private kindergarten on Old Street where the Q95 Radio Station studio is now located. After St. Joseph I attended the Roseau Mixed Infant School, which we simply called Mixed School then. I won a scholarship in 1950 to the Dominica Grammar School. In those days there was only one scholarship for the entire island.

How did you prepare for the exam?

The exam was staged at the Roseau Boys School in Newtown. My Dad visited Dominica once a year (he resided in Grenada then) and he told me that if I was able to win the scholarship, he would get me a bicycle. In those days, in 1949 Dominica, owning a bicycle was a grand thing.

I resigned from that point from all normal childhood activities and plunged into reading all the books on Arithmetic, English Literature and General Science I could find at the Roseau Public Library (A 1905 gift of Scottish-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie to the people of Dominica). I read until every page was imprinted in my memory.

So during the exam, I could actually turn the pages of the books I had read, in my mind. We had to learn to add pounds, shillings and pence, as we were a British colony and that was the currency then. We even had the farthing; there are four farthings in a penny; twelve pennies in a shilling; and twenty shillings in a pound. So you can imagine the intricacies in addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication in a word problem. We also had to do an oral exam in preparation, called mental Arithmetic where we had to solve those problems in our heads.

In what year did you start the DGS?

I started at the DGS in 1950; the school year started in January in that time. I got that bike; it was a British made Humber, painted in black.

At the DGS, what sports did you play?

I was in athletics such as running, the high jump, the pole vault, and throwing the cricket ball. I also played cricket and soccer.

What other school activities were you involved in?

I was a member of the DGS Cadet Corps (started at that school in 1910) and rose to the rank of corporal. We went to the Empire Days Parades; Armistice Day Parades at the Cenotaph next to Fort Young, just below the Anglican Church; we also practiced shooting at the old DGS – with our targets being fixed to the inside of the Hillsborough Street Wall.

When did you graduate?

I graduated from the 6th form in 1955 with a high school certificate in Botany, mathematics and Geography.

How did you get to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica?

My first job was at the Dominica Customs. Subsequently, DGS Principal Mr. Archer called me back to the school to serve as a junior master. In 1957, I got a British Commonwealth Development and Welfare Scholarship to go to Mona, Jamaica. Initially it was to do French.

I was required to come back to teach at the DGS. I was not the initial recipient. However, the person sent was not qualified. Since the person sent defaulted, I was sent in his stead.

How did you travel to Jamaica?

There was no airfield on Dominica at the time, so I took a truck to Scotts Head. At Scotts Head there was a pier for a small boat which took passengers to a seaplane which would land there; it was a Grumman Goose. The Grumman Goose took me to Barbados; from Barbados I took a British West Indian plane to Palisadoes Airport, Jamaica.

What were the highlights of your time at the University of the West Indies (UWI)?

Jamaica in 1957 was an eye opener. Jamaicans were proud of their culture, their history, the life of Marcus Garvey that great liberator for black people everywhere, their music which was promoted by that other great Jamaican Harry Belafonte.

The campus buzzed with the life and interaction of young people from all of the Caribbean islands many of whom would become leaders in their home countries, PJ Paterson, the doctors, teachers, scientists, all from our own University.. I took great interest in my scientific pursuits and sports. I played table tennis on my Hall's team, Chancellor, the hall of lions; and played soccer on the University team in the Jamaica 1st Div league.

Describe the nature of the Federation debate which took place while you were at UWI?

The debate about the Federation was complicated, because the campus was mixed with people from different islands and different parts of Jamaica. The faculty and students were fully in favor of the Federation of the British West Indian territories, under one federal government.

However, the rural Jamaican people were not so sure. The political contest was left to a referendum of the people. It was a choice between the statesman and Oxford Rhodes Scholar Norman Manley of the Peoples National Party and the opposition led by Alexander Bustamante of the Jamaica Labour Party.

Bustamante spread the propaganda in the countryside that small island people would come and take the lands of Jamaicans. The referendum result was against the federation. That then led to the departure of Trinidad next and the ultimate failure of the federation.

Would the Federation have been better for our islands why?

In hindsight it would have given the Caribbean a larger image in the world; we would be able to pull our resources together for more aggressive regional development.

Many of the developed countries were ready to help us move forward; Canada gave the two Federal boats: Federal Palm (for the Caribbean) and Maple (for Canada) to help inter island sea transport. To this day, we do not have a common marine transport policy and that has frustrated inter-island trade and cooperation.

What did you do upon your return to Dominica?

I was under Government bond to return to Dominica to teach. I began an aggressive program in Mathematics, Botany and Chemistry at 5th and 6th Form levels between the years 1962 and 1965. I also mounted a full sports Programme for all boys at the DGS.

We built the first turf wicket on the island; we had our own sports field behind the technical wing and on the banks of the Roseau River. Sports were compulsory; there was sports day every year at which boys competed among the school houses in track and field events. Many of our athletes went on to represent the island and even the West Indies in soccer and cricket.

Explain your role in setting up the science labs at the DGS

The labs for Botany, Zoology, Chemistry, and Physics were essential to building an understanding of these sciences by experimentation and practice. I built every lab with assistance of

other science masters in the new DGS with microscopes, balances and all the other tools to enable science students to grasp fully the scientific methods and to prepare for the Cambridge Overseas Exams. Many doctors, agriculturalists, and engineers emerged from these programs.

Tell us a bit about your family life?

My parents were very central to my journey in life. My mother Gladys Phillip Peters gave me every opportunity to learn even though she was not highly educated herself. She exhorted me by saying that I was born on a Saturday and would work hard to realize my ambitions in life.

She also cautioned that life has many challenges and extolled in French patois: where the gate is low that is where the cow jumps. I have carried that lesson through my young and adult life; Paddle your own canoe she said. For me that meant one must develop a certain level of independence if you are to win and achieve your dreams.

My father was away because he was running the Shillingford lime factory in Grenada. I had the opportunity of visiting him during the summer. I did enjoy tremendously the new experiences and meeting new people and spending enjoyable days on Grand Anse Beach with my siblings.

My father made a critical decision while I was still at the Roseau Mixed School. He said "My son, if you win the scholarship to go to the DGS I will give you a brand new bicycle on my return visit in Dominica." I worked very hard for 6 full months and came first in the scholarship exam. That experience gave me a jolt of confidence that with hard work one can achieve most things.

Tell us about your departure from Dominica and post graduate and research work.

There are many people who helped in my academic career and professional life. From Primary School, I was coached by Mr. Fingal at the Roseau Mixed School, then to Victor Archer at DGS and Dr Dennis Adams for my first degree in the sciences.

While I was teaching, I undertook to prepare for a Masters in Botany with a study of Dominica's Rain forest under the supervision of Dr Adams who visited me in Dominica to set up the schedule of work. Shortly after completion of the Masters, and on return to Jamaica in 1967, I was awarded a scholarship to do a second Masters in Plant Pathology at the Imperial College/University of London.

On return to Jamaica, I took my place in the Banana Board Research Dept as Senior Plant Pathologist. Much of my work in the Department was published and was central to the improvement of Jamaica's banana quality in the UK market. I was also given the role of Quality Controller.

In 1974 at the International Congress in Plant Pathology I met Dr Richard Ford at breakfast who offered me a research assistanceship at the University of Illinois. I arrived in Urbana Champaign with my wife Yvonne, daughter Gillian and son Ray on January 1, 1975 in the midst of a huge snow storm.

I had study leave from Jamaica for two years within which time the PhD was to be completed. Focus of the study was on the physiology and pathology that affected the quality and flavor of bananas. That entailed delving into the biochemistry of ripening, study of fungi affecting fruit quality and methods for control.

I completed the PhD under the direction of Dr James Sinclair by February of 1977 and returned to Jamaica to take up position as Director of Research and Development and to continue my Presidency of ACORBAT (Association for Cooperation in Banana Research in the Caribbean and Tropical America).

By way of the August 1979 Hurricane David in Dominica I returned to the US and took up role as Visiting Professor at University of Illinois for a few months with Dr Sinclair until I was offered the position of Development Manager with the Dupont Company in Wilmington, Delaware.

I worked as Development Manager in the Coral Gables, Miami office from 1980 to 1993 to provide technical support for Dupont agrochemicals for tropical crops in Latin America, the Caribbean, and West Africa, Philippines, northern Australia, the south Pacific Islands.

My focus was mostly on major crops like bananas and sugarcane. In 1993 I was relocated back to Wilmington as Research Associate in the newly formed Product Support Group to work mainly on product quality before products were released from manufacturing to farmers, and distributors of Dupont agrochemicals. I retired from Dupont in Dec 1998 at the age of 62.

How have you tried to give back to our people and country?

During my stay in Florida I worked with Dominicans to form SOFAD (South Florida Association of Dominicans). SOFAD brought WCK to Florida for the 1st time to participate in the Miami Carnival and to help in SOFAD's fund raising dances.

We established a series of lectures by Dominicans to Dominicans and other Caribbean peoples in various fields of investment and tax preparation, medicine, and other social and economic ventures.

SOFAD had a scholarship Programme for high school students in Dominica and provided assistance to the hospitals and other Dominican institutions. In addition we provided an audience for visiting Dominican leaders.

In 2001 and after my retirement I was asked by Raglan Riviere and Gabriel Christian to be President of the newly founded Dominica Academy of Arts & Sciences (DAAS). Our achievements and my role are spelt out on the Achievements page of our DAAS website at www.da-academy.org.

The DAAS mission was to assist as much as we could with developments in Dominica in education, culture, health, promotion of Tourism, agricultural and industrial development.

What would you like your legacy to be?

I am rather proud of my achievements and my station in life. I would like to be remembered as a man who did what he could with his God given talents in sport, the sciences, philanthropy and care for his fellow human beings and to leave the world a better place than I found it.

Any final words?

I married research scientist Margaret Szyleyko in October, 1997; she has done much to support my work for Dominica. My favorite song is Frank Sinatra's rendition of "My Way."