

Of excellence and service: The life and times of Dr. Davison Shillingford



A DGS Graduate and former General Motors USA senior economist and manager of Truck Competitor Analysis.

When and where were you born

I was born on December 19, 1940, in Roseau, at home in Bath Road. My parents were Abbott Shillingford from Colihaut, accountant at A.C. Shillingford & Co, and Aileen Shillingford nee Tavernier from Scotshead, Head Mistress at the Roseau Mixed School and Roseau Girls School. I have one brother, Conrad, and five sisters Lola, Vashti, Deborah, Jennifer and Leona.

Early days

I went to the Convent Montessori School at Casse O'Reilly next to the St Gerard's Hall. It was Dominica's first Montessori

School that I know of. Some of my classmates were Thomas Wyke related to the famous butcher near the mouth of the Roseau River (Boucherie), Colin Bully and Joey Lartigue.

I then went to the Roseau Mixed School where my mother was Head Mistress and my teacher was Mrs Agatha Robinson nee Mitchell. There I remember some very smart girls like Imelda Thompson, Ockie and Deravariere. From the Mixed School, I went to the Dominica Grammar School (DGS).

Clayton Shillingford also went to Mixed School when my mother was there. Joffre Robinson also taught me at the DGS – in the old school at the corner of Great George Street and Hillsborough Street.

The DGS Principal was Victor Archer from St Lucia and he would have Dover, the messenger, take switches from the big tamarind tree in the school yard to flog those of us who were so wayward that they had to be entered in the Black Book.

DGS Days

My DGS days were some of my most memorable. I did fairly well in academics. But we had many extra curricular activities. There were scouts, the Army Cadets, the debating society, cricket, soccer and athletics.

And we participated in all of these on various afternoons. We would go camping under scout master Wendell Lawrence. We would go marching every Thursday at 3.00 in the afternoon, and would do target shooting with .22 rifles on the school firing range.

These were modern rifles with proper sights; we did shooting under Range Master Cecil Goodridge, a Bajan (Barbadian). We competed against the Dominica Rifle Club and the Police Team.

One notable police marksman was the legendary Oliver N Phillip who later became Police Chief and a hero in defeating the attempted Defence Force Coup against Prime Minister Eugenia Charles in December 1981.

These extra-curricular activities taught me discipline, teamwork, leadership and organization. In 1957, in fifth form, I got a Grade 1 Senior School Certificate, the only boy in the island to achieve this – it was equivalent to the Cambridge General Certificate of Education “O” Level. Clayton Shillingford taught me Botany then.

Clayton and Raglan Riviere, who co-founded the Dominica Academy of Arts and Sciences, were four or five years ahead of me. DGS was all boys in those days and Clayton was Head Boy and Senior prefect, captain of the DGS cricket team and Raglan was a prefect and star athlete.

Raglan later went to the UK, joined the RAF and blazed a path forward in academia. In 1959, I became a Prefect and in 1960 Headboy and Senior Prefect, following on the heels of the headboy before me, Franklin Watty, and Clayton some years earlier. Also in 1960, the DGS team went to Grenada for the Windward Islands Inter School Tournament.

We played hard but won no accolades. However, some of our boys, like Osie Lewis, Ronald Osborne and Rosie Douglas, won the hearts of the prettiest girls.

Rosie Douglas had left St Mary’s Academy and came on Tour with us; he was also a cadet. Rosie was always giving jokes. Nobody could give jokes like him. (Author’s note: Roosevelt “Rosie” Douglas became a civil rights hero in Canada and Prime Minister of Dominica.)

In sixth form, I did Mathematics, Botany, Geography and General Paper. On graduation, I taught briefly at the DGS, then got a

scholarship to study agriculture at the University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine, Trinidad, originally the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA).

This school was highly regarded and hosted students from all corners of the old British Empire, such as Fiji, Malaysia, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, and the UK. It was an excellent institution. I did a Bachelor of Science in agricultural economics, and graduated in 1966 with Upper Second Class Honors – no one got a First Class that year.

How was life in Trinidad?

Life in Trinidad was about balancing school work and parties. There were lots of guys on campus who were all out for a good time and partied heartily. Others were more serious, and took to their books. I was a centrist; not too much partying; “the theory of the mean” was my guide.

The students were a quite mixed group. There was a wide range of ethnicities and nationalities. Many students from Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados came to campus with all A’s. At first I was a bit intimidated – all A’s !!!

Then after some surreptitious investigation, I realized that this was largely due to superb teaching in high school. On weekends, we had our fair share of parties or socialized at the bar on campus.

It must be noted that there were many older expatriate students, and the old ICTA’s campus facilities and traditions we inherited were designed for these expatriates. At dinner, for example, we had to put on our student gown; everybody had to wear it. No gown no dinner.

The Trinidadians were a happy and generous people, and I have very fond memories of the friends I made there. Some would take us to their homes for dinner on holidays or weekends. Some

would invite us to join them to watch carnival in the stands or to parties at their homes. They were a gracious lot.

Early Heroes

My early heroes were the senior school boys. They were all cadets such as Michael Garraway, Clayton Shillingford, Wendell Lawrence, Sidney Jones, Simon Richards, and Ralph St. Luce.

These were all outstanding cadets whose demeanor and leadership impressed me as a boy; as a group, they were a significant influence in my life. I admired them on parade and looked forward to the day I would join the cadets.

Above all, however, to me as a little mite, they were intellectual giants who marched up to get the prizes on speech day. (Authors note: Dr. Michael Garraway became a leading plant pathologist at Ohio State University; Dr Clayton Shillingford, a botanist, became Research Director at the Jamaica Banana Board, was Global Product Development of the Dupont Co Agricultural Products Division and became first Dominica Academy of Arts & Sciences (DAAS) President; Wendell Lawrence became Chief Technical Officer in the Ministry of Communications and Works, Dr Sidney Jones attended Howard Medical School and became a respected OBGYN, Simon Richards became a New York attorney and Dominica's Ambassador to the United Nations; Dr. Ralph St Luce became a well known physician in the US).

In the wider world, my parents introduced us to the likes of Isaac Newton and Louis Pasteur. At home in Dominica, it was the Boyd brothers, Dr Watty and Dr Dorian Shillingford, all of whom won island scholarships and went away to study medicine.

My mother would say, "They all studied hard. Study like them and you'll win a scholarship to go to college." Other successes to be emulated were Professor Thomas Henderson of Grandbay who did a PhD in Agriculture and was a lecturer at UWI in Trinidad;

and Justice Keith Alleyne, who was an Island Scholar and became Dominica's first Queen's Counsel.

His brother Osmund St Claire Alleyne, a former DGS Cadet, became a war hero, and perished in air combat in the Royal Air Force.

What did you read in those days?

I read voraciously at home and in school. In Sixth Form, Leo Austin from British Guiana was my English teacher. He introduced us to writers like Sam Selvon, VS Naipaul, CLR James, Shakespeare, Dante and Boccaccio (Decameron).

At home, reading was more action oriented. There was Tarzan, Ryder Haggard, Alexander Dumas, Sabatini and H G Wells. Austin later became attorney general under Prime Minister Patrick John.

Back to Dominica and the Botanic Gardens

On graduation I went back to Dominica to work as land use officer in the Ministry of Agriculture under Dr. J.B Yankey, one of the first locals to get a PhD in agriculture. In those days, we were in the midst of the banana boom which built our middle class and lifted many rural folk out of poverty.

The banana fields were so plentiful that we had planes flying from Melville Hall doing crop spraying against banana diseases. I worked with people like Allan Guy, GHC Grell, and Errol Harris. Colin Bully came to the department a year after me.

In the Gardens, apart from the cocoa nurseries, there were plots of various economic crops, including cocoa, avocado, sugar cane, allspice, coffee, grapefruits, oranges, tangerines mandarins, rubber trees and cinnamon. It was after Hurricane David of 1979 that things plummeted and the Garden plots began deteriorating.

The Botanic Gardens can be rehabilitated to make it a first class tourist attraction and a catalyst to propagate new and productive plant types to boost food security. As a kid, I spent many happy days playing in the Gardens; and it is my hope that with the DAAS Gardens website, we have built a vehicle that spotlights the Gardens and can help us find resources to revive it.

The Botanic Gardens is a worthy colonial legacy that we need to maintain for the education and health of our people, for its economic potential, and for posterity; as Singapore has done, and as Jamaica is now doing with its Hope Gardens.

Away Again

In January 1967, I went on a UN Food and Agriculture (FAO) course in the Netherlands and Rome. Flushed with new ideas and possibilities, I came back to Dominica to promote pig farming based on reject bananas and local coconut meal.

The experimental results were successful but before I could implement them I got an assistantship to study Development Planning at Cornell University. While there the experimental results were published in the Journal of Tropical Agriculture in London. At Cornell, I did my MS on the Agricultural Performance of Dominican Land Types, passing in the top 10% of the class.

Then I went on to my PhD, doing my thesis on Sugar Cane Harvest Mechanization in Jamaica. As a graduate student, one had close relationships with the professors, and we were particularly grateful to those professors who would take students home at holiday times when they would otherwise have been alone on campus.

After graduation, I had plans of returning to work at home. However, no positions were available and I accepted a position at the Caricom Secretarial in Guyana where I stayed for three years

then returned to N. America. Because I had no “N. American experience”, getting a job proved more elusive than expected.

But the work ethics I had learned at home and at the DGS allowed me to quickly get that experience, and after two part time teaching jobs, I landed a job at General Motors doing automobile forecasting, not unlike the food forecasting I had been doing at Caricom.

Work Life at General Motors

I worked at GM as an economist for 25 years until I retired. Work was interesting and challenging and I enjoyed it tremendously. The routine part – monthly reports and presentations – was pretty standard.

You always gave your best using international levels of performance as your benchmarks. I built auto demand models to forecast auto sales; I attended auto shows in the US and Japan to report on competitive products. As Manager of Competitor Analysis we studied competitor performance and quality, and reported on this to top management.

Our work is seen today in better GM trucks and cars. That sort of process could be replicated where our government partnered with our skilled people overseas to improve our products, health conditions and management techniques. I also worked on the economic and marketing aspects of a US Automated Highway System. For this I was awarded GM President’s Honors for superior originality and creativity.

What of the race issue?

Well, for West Indians in N. America, this issue crops up not infrequently. For me, it rarely occurred, I think largely because of my technical training. Similarly, trained Asians, like those I worked with, report the same experience.

However, on the occasions when the race issue was evident, I dealt with it head on — the first “manifestation” was a mistake; the second can be no error; and on the third, I now have three pieces of evidence, and I say something, like, “Cut this nonsense out; I know you didn’t mean it, but here is the evidence.”

Apart from that, I do good work, and more than my fair share. This generally preempts the issue. This is my approach.

Family Life

I got married in September 1969 to Margaret Kerr of Jamaica. I met her in Jamaica during a summer job stint. She was a nurse at the UWI Hospital and lived on campus. We have three kids: one girl, Saidia, and two boys, Kahlil, and Michael. What do they do, you ask? Well, all three are medical doctors.

Saidia is an internist and Associate Chief at the VA Hospital in West Palm Beach, Florida, Khalil is a general and laparoscopic surgeon in Boca Raton, Florida, and Michael is a pediatric cardiovascular surgeon at the University of Florida in Jacksonville.

As my parents did for me, I always held out images of success to them; and failure too. As 9-12 year olds, I once took them to a part of NY with garbage-strewn streets and crumbling houses. “This is where we will have to live if you do not work hard.” I told them. “No, no, Daddy, not here.” They said.

I smiled and said, “Well then, you must work and study harder”. To encourage them in middle and high school, I paid them for good work at semester’s end: \$20 for an “A”, \$10 for a “B”, and \$5 for a “C”. This was for hard subjects like math, chemistry and physics.

For soft subjects like Phys Ed or Typing, they got half as much. It is not that the soft subjects were not important, but in a world dominated by science and technology, one must master, above all, the basic subjects of science and technology. We stressed excellence, not second-class performance.

You have been a leader in the DAAS and organizer of its Botanic Gardens Website and Island Scholars list, among other initiatives. We thank you for your work. Any final words?

On the issue of Dominica's development, we are going to have substantial difficulty because too many of our people, especially our trained people, leave the country.

The USA is the converse of this; and it has benefited tremendously from in-migration. It attracts the best brains from around the world, because it is an organized, rule of law country, merit-based society. We must do the same. We must create an environment that will keep our trained people at home and bring home those who have left.

We created the Dominica Academy of Art & Sciences (DAAS) as an internet platform to aid in that process, to help provide the critical mass of human capital to propel development.

With respect to DAAS, it can be an effective vehicle to help development at home. But its future will have to be based on more work stateside. While DAAS was built on the internet, we need more face-to-face time.

We need to set up local chapters, where members can sit, break bread, and focus not only on issues facing Dominica, but equally on the issues facing them stateside, personal and family issues such as jobs, scholarships, how to finance a home or business, health care, real estate, insurance, immigration, and education for the kids.

In terms of balance, we need more focus on the welfare of the stateside members of the organization; this is essentially nil now. We cannot focus only on Dominica. Members will continue to ask, subliminally or otherwise, what's in it for me. And for the child born in the US, Dominica is only a vague reality.

Still, we need the contribution of such children as active participants in Dominica's development. In order to do this, we also have to first take care of the parent members and their needs. It is only after this is done, we can then better aid Dominica.

The Jews did the same thing. They built their strength in the Diaspora first. The Chinese in N. America do the same. A focus on Dominica alone, as we did in the first years of DAAS, was then OK. Now, this is not sustainable.

We need to better feed the roots in the overseas communities, where we are, at the same time that we call on them to feed the needs on the ground at home. Dominica has enough potential in its tourism and agriculture, and in its people, for it to become the Singapore of the Caribbean.