

A woman of the world from beauty queen to diplomat

Cover story by Jane Whiting

Life truly has been an amazing journey for Jennifer Hosten. As a proud West Indian and Canadian, this woman of the world took off from her native Caribbean island of Grenada to travel around the globe and back again. She's lived and worked in Ottawa, London and Bangladesh, and visited just about everywhere in between!

From the glamour and controversy of being the first recognized "woman of colour" to be crowned Miss World in 1970, to the diplomatic role of serving as Grenada's High Commissioner to Canada, her life has been a whirlwind of unique experiences. The transition of her personal titles from "Miss Jenny" to "Miss World" and then from "Mom" to "Her Excellency" illustrates how a smart and beautiful woman with a strong social conscience can juggle a celebrity-filled life with a family and work in the field of international development.

Never forgetting that she's a mother and grandmother, Hosten called her family the most meaningful part of her life at an interview in Ottawa during the launch of her new book, *Beyond Miss World. An autobiography of Jennifer Hosten, Miss World 1970*. It's a first-hand account of her fascinating and diverse life, which is now starting a new chapter of living in semi-retirement with her husband Shaun Sarsfield, who co-wrote the autobiography.

Certainly her life story begins with her West Indian parents who she credits with "making me the person I am." Her strict father was a prominent lawyer and her Grenadian/Canadian mother's involvement in public service and the Caribbean Women's Association was an especially big influence.

The roots of a tight-knit family and close community upbringing in Grenada go deep for Hosten. But her adventurous nature and willingness to always "take the plunge" motivated her move to Montreal in the late '60s "to see what it was like." She worked for the CBC for a short while and also trained in radio broadcasting with the BBC in London before becoming a flight attendant with British West Indian Airways, (now Caribbean Airlines).

Here's where destiny stepped in and catapulted Hosten onto the world stage. She calls her voyage to fame as "somewhat accidental." It all started 38 years ago during a chat with Miss Guyana on a flight from London to Trinidad.

"We talked and she asked me where I was from and if Grenada was sending a contestant to the Miss World contest. As I was living in Trinidad at the time, I had no idea and laughed when she suggested that I should enter."

However, later that day she discovered that Grenada was looking for a Miss World contestant. The very next day, at another coincidental meeting, she was

encouraged to try out for the Miss Grenada title by a family friend who was also the official organizer.

Of course, she won that contest and went on to claim the title of Miss World 1970, becoming the first “honey-coloured” winner. It was the beginning of many wonderful firsts for the 22-year-old, including some negative ones – public exposure to blatant racism and feminist attacks by the Women’s Liberation Movement.

The young beauty reportedly handled the prejudice with dignity, grace and a natural diplomacy. These admirable qualities served Hosten so well during her later diplomatic career. But the whole experience also made her more aware of her barrier-breaking role as a Caribbean woman of colour and laid the foundation for her work in international development.

As the new Miss World, she recalls being very conscious of her heritage and more determined to “make darn sure that I didn’t leave a negative impression.”

In fact, the organizers of the Miss World contest claimed she was “one of the best ever” in a British newspaper. She was described as being very popular with everyone and nearly stealing the show when she was chosen by Bob Hope to help him entertain the US troops in Vietnam on his 1970 Christmas Tour.

During her year-long tour as Miss World, Hosten was introduced to a glamorous life of meeting movie stars, heads of state, dignitaries and a host of celebrity entertainers. She travelled all over Britain before heading off to the Caribbean (where she was a celebrated home-coming queen), to Africa, New Zealand, Australia and New York.

At the end of an exhausting, yet exciting year, she married a Canadian and lived in Bermuda for a while before arriving in Ottawa on a cold winter’s day in 1973. Living on a farm in the rural community of Osgoode was certainly very different for the former beauty queen, but she kept busy by working for Air Canada and embraced motherhood with the arrival of Sophia and Beau.

It seems her motto of “whatever I do I try to do as well as I can” really does apply to everything. Hosten considers her two children to be her best work. She proudly explains that her married daughter Sophia is career-oriented and currently lives in Afghanistan working for a medical emergency relief company. And Beau is involved in property management in Vancouver, where he lives with his wife and two young daughters.

Still, even with two young children, Hosten was not about to stay home and live a quiet life. In 1978 she received a call from the Prime Minister of Grenada, who offered her the position of being the country’s High Commissioner to Canada, based on her excellent Ambassador reputation and international experience as Miss World.

She accepted. The only problem was the issue of diplomatic Grenadian representation in Canada, as Hosten also held Canadian citizenship. It was solved by making a special concession to allow her to have diplomatic immunity only for job-related purposes. It was the first arrangement of joint representation for dual nationals which now extends to other diplomats from Commonwealth countries in Canada – again marking another first for Hosten.

As “Her Excellency” she was also the first woman diplomat to visit the Canadian Arctic as part of an annual guided tour for Heads of Mission in Ottawa. After being initially invited, she was then told by the protocol department that no females could go, due to insufficient facilities.

The intervention by Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau soon changed that ruling after they met at a cocktail party. While explaining why she wasn’t going on the trip, Hosten said he looked at her and remarked, “You’re not going to let that stand in your way are you?” She replied hopefully, “What do you think?” And the next morning she had a call confirming that she was allowed on the tour.

Following her three-year position as High Commissioner, Hosten turned her attention to university studies and graduated with a Masters degree in Political Science and International Relations from Carleton University. In the early 1990s she managed an anti-racism campaign for the department of Citizenship and Immigration and then worked for the Canadian International Development Agency for 15 years in order to do “something useful with her life.”

Life with CIDA took her to St. Lucia, the Ukraine, Pakistan and a two- year posting to Bangladesh. Hosten describes the extreme development challenges of that country in her book, along with how her own life experiences and cultural understanding gave her a special interest in helping to empower women around the world.

It was her second husband Shaun Sarsfield who suggested they write her life story together. He began the project by interviewing his wife for an hour every weekend and working from an actual tape of the Miss World contest. In 2004, Hosten took early retirement from CIDA and the couple worked on completing the manuscript and building a home in Grenada.

“I find that life can go in circles for me,” says Hosten. “It starts somewhere, goes somewhere else and then seems to come back again. It makes me realize how small the world is. Even though I was born and raised in Grenada – my travels make me feel like a citizen of the world -- my links are everywhere.”

Hosten and her husband opened “Jenny’s Place” a small private resort on Grand Anse Beach in Grenada in 2005 and it is their island home for six months of the year. The other six months they call Ottawa home. “I love Canada and we’re always in Ottawa for Canada Day because I have so many friends here from all my very different walks of life.”

Beyond Miss World. An Autobiography of Jennifer Hosten, Miss World 1970, written by Jennifer Hosten with Shaun Sarsfield, is available in Canada at Chapters on Rideau Street and online at: www.beyondmissworld.com

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