

# WALKERSWOOD 21<sup>ST</sup> BIRTHDAY

**- Norman Girvan -**

This must be one of the happiest 21<sup>st</sup> birthday parties I've ever been to!

The American writer Mark Twain is reputed to have said that when he was 13 years old he was disappointed to find out how little his father knew about the world they were living in, but by the time he turned 21 he was amazed to discover how much the old fellow had learned in a few short years.

Walkerswood Caribbean Foods was humble at age 13 and is still humble at age 21. But you certainly have a great deal to celebrate, and we who are your guests tonight are privileged to be able to share in your sense of accomplishment, of achievement, and of satisfaction.

Walkerswood Caribbean Foods will have annual sales of J\$100 million in 1999. \$100 million! In their first full year of operation sales were just \$31,000. Even after taking into account the devaluation of the J\$, this is a 150-fold increase in US\$ terms. If Walkerswood Caribbean Foods had been a 7-pound baby at birth, at 21 years it would be weighing in at about half a ton!

The baby firm started out with just one product line—jerk seasoning—and a market that was confined to the parish of St Ann. In its childhood, it learnt to bottle the jerk seasoning and to extend its market to the whole island of Jamaica. Like a good primary school student, it learnt well from its teachers, in this case the JIDC, which provided process technology.

But it also learnt to pay its own way, for it took a conscious decision to pay the JIDC for its assistance, small and fledgling though it was. And when some teething pains came, in the form of financial difficulties, the employees took a decision to take a collective salary cut, rather than to beg others for help, or to sell out, or to go bankrupt.

Walkerswood Caribbean Foods developed a culture of financial self-reliance in its childhood, which has served it well throughout its life. Today the firm can say with pride that it has never defaulted on a single debt. It has never had a bailout. And it has never sold itself out to another firm.

As its childhood came to an end it took its next big step when it launched into exporting, selling to the Jamaican community abroad. But it also faced another major challenge when its exports were blocked in the New York market by petty labeling regulations. It never cried and went back to mama, for it had no mama to help it out. It dealt with the problem, and overcame it. For Walkerswood Caribbean Foods, this was the Common Entrance Examination, and it passed with flying colours.

Now a young adult, it began to diversify its products as it expanded its export markets. As a child, it had been good at one thing, now it mastered a whole range of subjects. It went into products like Jonkanoo Hot Pepper Sauce, Coconut Rundown Sauce, Solomon Gundy, Curry Powder. Just to hear these names makes your mouth water!

It also established a farming division and a restaurant division, which enables the firm to “take food from the Caribbean soil right through to the plate in the foreign market”. Walkerswood Caribbean Foods has always sought to break new ground, literally as well as figuratively.

As a young adult, it faced new challenges. In 1997-1998 the drought that afflicted the whole island sent escalation supplies down and prices up. At the same time the company was hit by the skyrocketing of interest rates which ate into its cash flow. For Walkerswood Caribbean Foods this was a double whammy.

The staff responded by working even harder to increase productivity. Some worked before breakfast, others late at nights. During this period productivity increased by an incredible 60 percent! Assistance was also obtained from a private financial institution for the restructuring of the debt to reduce interest charges. Let me emphasise—this was not a bailout, it was a debt restructuring with a private firm.

The managers of this freely, and gratefully, acknowledge the advice and assistance they received from DB&G in this exercise, and earlier from the JIDC and indeed from other people, many providing voluntary service. But this was assistance, not charity; and it was not wasted, but productively used. Those who provided it were wise enough to recognise the potential of the organisation and the integrity of those who lead it and work for it.

Not for nothing is it said that God helps those who help themselves. I am reminded of a simple story told by Sir Phillip Sherlock. One night long ago, I think it was in the 1940s, he was driving his car on the steep road leading up Spur Tree Hill in Manchester. The lights of his car picked out a poor farmer and his donkey, laden with produce, on their way to market. The young Sherlock stopped his car and had the farmer load the baskets of produce into the trunk. At the top of Spur Tree Hill he waited patiently while the farmer, now riding the donkey, caught up with him. Thanking him, the farmer said, “you know, mi wife didda tell me it would tek more than one jackass to carry dis load up de hill”.

I don’t know if Walkerswood Caribbean Foods would thank those who helped them in quite the same way, but the help is both well deserved and highly appreciated.

Today friends Walkerswood Caribbean Foods can truly say that it come of age. It boasts some 14 product lines across a whole range of seasoning, sauces, spices and other food products. It exports 80 percent of its sales, about US\$2 million. It counts some 70 members of staff in the Walkerswood Team. It buys products from nearly 100 farmers with annual purchases worth nearly \$20 million.

Jamaica needs more firms like Walkerswood Caribbean Foods to make the economy grow. Jamaica needs more firms like Walkerswood Caribbean Foods for exports to prosper. Jamaica needs more firms like Walkerswood Caribbean Foods to provide jobs and reduce poverty in the rural areas of Jamaica.

Walkerswood Caribbean Foods has a lot to teach larger established firms run by MBAs and highly paid executives. Perhaps if they had behaved like Walkerswood Caribbean Foods in prudent financial management and responding to crisis by taking salary cuts, Jamaica would not be faced with a FINSAC bill of \$90 billion today!

Economists have invented fancy names for the accomplishments of firms like Walkerswood Caribbean Foods. They call it entrepreneurship, product innovation, product and market diversification, building competitive advantages, vertical integration, strategic marketing, good financial management. And they call it employee participation. Commitment. Teamwork.

The Walkerswood team speaks of the deeper spiritual and human values that lie behind this. They speak of the strong bonds of faith in God that unite them. They speak of constant communication—talking through the problems of human relations, of debt and drought as they arise and how to deal with them. They speak of a constant effort at meditation, reflection, self-criticism, and seeking guidance from above.

They speak of the importance of community rootedness, of partnership and of equity. The firm is owned by 12 partners, all originating from this a community, none of which owns more 17.5 percent of the shares. The 60 employees and the 100 farmers are all from the community. The ratio of salaries at the top to those at the bottom is nowhere as wide as in established firms. There are no managers at the top living high on the hog while the workers eke out a living. It comes as no surprise that the employees need no Union to defend their interests, and that there has never once been a strike in its 21 years of existence.

They speak of the importance of trust. Let me tell you another Sherlock story. While he was living on the University campus, one day he observed two women on their way to Papine market. It seems one had lost a coin, a shilling, a lot of money in those days. Her friend was helping her to look for it. As they scratched around in the dust at the side of the road, the first woman said to her friend, “You know, a not saying is you tek mi money, but if yu wasn’t helping me look for it a believe a wuda fine it long time”.

So the trust wasn’t there! But the trust and community co-operation that has carried this enterprise through thick and thin did not start only 21 years ago. Walkerswood was the site of the first Pioneer Club in Jamaica, formed by Jamaica Welfare back in 1940. Walkerswood gave birth to the Lucky Hill Co-operative Farm, the first registered co-op farm in Jamaica, a few years later.

I feel a strong personal connection with the history of Walkerswood because my own parents, Thom and Rita Girvan, were privileged to be part of these developments. My

mother recalls how they knew Mrs Simson of Bromley and how the members of the community used to come to her house every Sunday morning for prayers. My father got to talking with Peter Hinds and Alton Henry, natural leaders in the community, and asked them about the needs of the community. Out of those meetings there emerged the Walkerswood Pioneer Club and later the Lucky Hill Farm, which lasted for decades.

So the critical role of religious faith in bridging the gap between the materially privileged and the materially less privileged—and please note that I said materially because those who are poor in property are often rich in talent, in resourcefulness and in spirit—the critical role of religious faith in bridging these gaps inherited from our history and the role of a philosophy of co-operation in fostering community development—were evident as long as 60 years ago.

The love and regard for the people of this community felt by Minnie Simson, the beloved matriarch of Bromley, one of the sweetest, kindest, and gentlest human beings I have ever known; the vision and organisational skills of Thom Girvan; and the leadership skills and talent of Peter Hinds and Alton Henry, laid the foundations of tradition on which Walkerswood Caribbean Foods were later to draw.

I still remember the story of the tropical storm of 1944—they didn't give them funny names like Lenny or Gilbert in those days—which caught my father on a visit to Walkerswood for a meeting of the co-op farm. The story goes that he and Alton Henry braced themselves against the huge door at the south side of the Bromley Great House as the winds blew; and as the eye of the storm passed over they had to run to the door on the north side to brace it as the winds blew with greater force from the other side!

After that storm, it was the Walkerswood Pioneer Club with Thom Girvan that went around the community to see what could be done to help the people repair the damage to their homes. The people did not wait for government to help them.

Some of my earliest and dearest childhood memories are of holidays I spent in Walkerswood, romping with Jonna and Roddy in the yard at Bromley and on the beaches of Laughing Water, listening to the haunting sound of the gas lamps at night at Bromley, and the obligatory attendance at morning prayers.

My mother recalls with pleasure and pride not only those early days, but also the time she spent with Walkerswood Caribbean Foods in the 1980s, helping to build the marmalade side of the operation.

So my friends the partnership between the Great House and the village, between the descendants of the masters and the slaves, the English and the Africans, that partnership that is symbolised by the bonds forged between Minnie Simson, Thom Girvan, Peter Hinds and Alton Henry back in the 1940s; a partnership whose roots go back into our history to the work of enlightened Missionaries with the Africans on the plantation, that gave rise to the struggles of Daddy Sharp and Paul Bogle; a partnership that supported the tenacious self-reliance and cooperation of the free people of Jamaica in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century; it is this tradition of partnership and trust that forms the social capital on which this enterprise has drawn.

And today that partnership is represented by the bond between Woody and Roddy, the one the central figure in production and the other the central figure in marketing, the twin anchors of this enterprise, who have shown that it is indeed possible to overcome the disabilities of the body and of history. We are humbled by their example.

If only Jamaica could be a national partnership of this kind, based on social justice, equity, and mutual respect, how much of a healthier, saner, more prosperous and more stable society would we have!

So there is much to celebrate, and to ponder on, this evening, and not only about Walkerswood Caribbean Foods. And as you savour the warm glow of achievement and of comradeship, I know you will be thinking too about the future, with confidence and perhaps with some trepidation.

You will be wondering what the next 21 years have in store for you. The new century, the new millennium. Globalisation, competition. You will know that to survive, you cannot afford to stand still, but must seek constantly to break new ground.

You will be wondering about succession--whether Walkerswood Caribbean Foods can survive a transition from the leadership of the founders to a new generation of leaders, managers, partners and employees; a transition that must come sometime the next 21 years.

“People with scruples can very successfully build up organisations which are taken over in due time by unscrupulous leaders”. The words are those of Thom Girvan, back in 1961 when he was dismayed by what he saw happening to his beloved Jamaica. He went on “as our forefathers wisely pointed out you can ‘Bill bush fe mek monkey run race’”.

So your greatest challenge is to remain faithful to your traditions, to your philosophy and to your principles of integrity, trust and co-operation while you respond to global competition and to a fast changing economic environment. To ensure that you preserve what you have built, even as you seek to build further on it.

I believe I can truthfully say that you can count on the support of all the friends that you have assembled here for this celebration. We have confidence in you. 50 years ago Norman Manley wrote

“ I have an abounding faith in the people of this country....they have their faults, but these are the faults of the economic and social condition under which they live, and the fruit of the historical legacy they suffer from. They have endured all these things and are enduring today with the great potentialities which they possess. It is the greatest proof of the unquenchable power of the human spirit. Greater potentialities could not be found anywhere in the world”.

Norman Manley's faith in the Jamaican people is our faith in Walkerswood Caribbean Foods. May you have a happy and successful next 21 years. God be with you.