

FINAL PROJECT - PROFILE

A CATALYST CALLED JORDAN

A glimpse into the life of the woman who shaped Caribbean chemistry

For seven years, I only knew Miss Shirley Elinor Jordan as an educator. Three years ago, I happened to be one of the many ambitious science students who frequented her “bottom house” for chemistry lessons. Like many others before me, I stayed with her for four years, eagerly (for the most part, at least) absorbing as much of her teachings as I could.

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SHIRLEY E. JORDAN

But Miss Jordan is more than a chemistry lessons teacher and those, like myself, who have only seen her

as a teacher, have a woefully narrow perspective of who she is. Miss Jordan is a Christian Minister, a chemistry teacher, a motivator and an innovator. She has touched countless lives directly and indirectly through her forty years of service to both the church and Caribbean education. Yet, she remains humble enough to wear her life on her sleeve without boasting.

In mid-March, I sat in on one of Miss Jordan’s classes and conversed with a few of her students. They were all fond of her expansive knowledge and unconventional teaching methods. She encouraged them to learn by conjuring unusual analogies, teaching them self-composed songs (sheet music included) and encouraging discussion and debate in her classes.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Name: Shirley Elinor Jordan

Age: 64

Occupation: Chemistry Lessons Teacher, CXC Exam Moderator, Pastor,

Qualifications: B.Sc. in Chemistry (Biology minor), Dip. Ed., M.Ed in Science Education

Schools attended: The Bishops’ High School, University of Guyana, Framingham State University

Employment History:

- HOD(ag) of the Mathematics and Science Department, Queen’s College
- Chief Examiner for CXC, CAPE School Based Assessment
- Head of National Chemistry Committee for Chemistry Teachers
- Chief Examiner for NAFFAT (National Fourth Form Assessment Examination)
- University of Guyana (Two years spent lecturing at the Faculty of Education)

However, they warned, one should not let the fun and games fool you into thinking she is soft. She is still a strict teacher who despises and punishes lateness and demands that her students to maintain a professional standard.

Jordan's success as a teacher didn't come easy. In fact, teaching was not her first career choice.

"I wanted to be a doctor," Jordan said when asked about her career in education. Her dreams of medicine were squashed when she realised that her family didn't have the financial means for her international education, nor was she eligible for a scholarship. Instead, she did a degree in chemistry locally. Upon completing the program, she says, she was immediately asked to teach Lower and Upper Sixth Form chemistry at the St. Roses' High School. She was just twenty-three years old.

"I think it's a gift-thing in our family, the ability to communicate knowledge," Jordan mentioned. Her particular gift extends beyond the Guyanese borders. She worked her way up the educational ranks, becoming a leader and pioneer in her field. She started *Science et al.*, a business dedicated to online and face-to-face science instruction and made her way through the ranks in various organisations and schools. The most notable of her achievements may be her aid in pioneering the CAPE Chemistry syllabus for the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) in the 1990s, thus helping to set the scene for advanced studies in the Caribbean.

Jordan lamented that she has gone as far as is morally and legally possible in her science career. She never wanted to become a headmistress and her desire to remain a teacher conflicted with an alternative career as an examination writer. All she wanted was to remain in her niche and become a "Master Teacher" of Science.

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But education is only secondary to Jordan. Her heart, she says, lies with her dedication to her faith and this has led her down another complex path, that is somewhat parallel to her strides in education.

"I became an Anglican just by virtue of the fact that my mother was an Anglican," Jordan explained. Her mother had no qualms about what denomination Jordan frequented, so long as she sought God. So, she went to both Anglican and Nazarene Sunday schools until Alan John Knight— the then Archbishop of the West Indies — confirmed her into the Anglican faith.

Jordan grew tired of the monotony of Anglicanism and soon began to struggle to find her personal relationship with God. She told me that it took her five years, but she finally found her salvation. In December 1967, she accepted Christ as her saviour in the bathroom of her childhood home in Agricola. Five years later, in 1972, she said that she was baptised by the Holy Spirit.

"I [then] realised that there was something more to *God*, where the Holy Spirit could fill you up and give you another language...to communicate with God in a deeper way," she said as her eyes twinkled with wonderment as she pointed to one of her downstairs windows. There, she said, where her library is now located, was where her spiritual baptism took place.

This connection, Jordan says, was her spiritual baptism and she believes that its results made her certain that God had redirected her life for her inborn purpose. In her pursuit of that goal, however, Jordan managed to

forge an earthly path and touch many lives with her teaching, leadership and ministry.

“Every place I was, I would somehow manage to get into the leadership,” Jordan mused with slight amusement. At both The Bishops High School and University, her leadership started with the Interschool and Intervarsity Fellowship which led her down a path to becoming a co-pastor at the non-denominational church on Lamaha Street she now helps to lead.

When I visited her church, I noticed that Miss Jordan’s methods of teaching and preaching are quite similar. In church, she used experiments and props and actively engaged her congregation in conversation. Jordan, I realised, didn’t just revel in the impartation of knowledge. She is a catalyst; her delight comes from acting as a bridge to elusive epiphanies, whether chemical or spiritual.

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“I would give myself pretty near an ‘A’ for the chemistry, science, but I would give myself pretty near an ‘F’ for my Christian ministry,” Jordan confessed,

“because that I am becoming increasingly aware of how much I don’t know and how far there is still to go.”

This was a surprising admission, but it revealed Jordan’s predictions for her own future.

“I know that if, let’s suppose that today or tomorrow...I were to die, people would have a grand service and say ‘Oh, I did wonderful things and I was such a great this, and a great that.’ I would have a wonderful program, and people would say all kinds of things. They’d be wrong. Ninety-nine percent of the church has a limited vision with regards to what the calling of the believer in Christ is [so] they would think I have done well. I know I haven’t done well.

“So, I want less of chemistry and more of what I am doing because one of those takes time and contemplation. And I don’t want to spend all my time marking books. I want less business in terms of chemistry and more time in terms quietness.”

Jordan has had a long, constructive career in both chemistry and her ministry. She has touched many lives with both her spiritual and scientific teaching as well as her relentless dedication to encouraging people to reach their fullest potentials. She does not advertise her achievements but chooses to remain humble and quiet within her communities as she continues her pursuit of deeper spiritual knowledge.