

## PROFILE

# Nellie Weekes

— ACTIVIST, ORGANIZER  
AND CHAMPION

By Avonda Burrowes

At a time when Barbadian women are continually making their voices heard in their quest for equal opportunities with men, we should remember that such rights were fought for in the 1940s by a woman who helped to pioneer the movement of her sex into the political sphere.

In the vanguard of the struggle for women's rights was Muriel Odessa Weekes, popularly known as "Nellie," who, today at 86, remains as witty and outspoken as a much younger woman.

Nellie was the only Barbadian woman during the past four decades who had the gumption to go forward and, ignoring all criticism, speak out against the "evils" which women were facing in those days.

Born August 26, 1896, Nellie grew up in My Lord's Hill, St. Michael, along with such prominent Barbadians as the late Sir Grantley Adams — who was later to become Prime Minister of the West Indies Federation — and the late Sir Winston Scott, Barbados' first native governor-general.

One of 13 children of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Walcott, she was educated at Belmont Girls' School and Lynch's Secondary School. On leaving school, she entered the field of nursing, working first at the old General Hospital and then the St. Michael Almshouse (now a district hospital) where she studied midwifery.

After serving for some years as an obstetric nurse, Nellie entered the political arena. Her decision to do so was based on the fact that she had devoted much time to social and welfare



services and was not content just to contribute to those areas.

Thus, she moved nearer to the area of policy making and began to pave the way for women today.

She unsuccessfully contested a seat in the House of Assembly for St. George, as an independent candidate, in 1942 and again in 1946. At her first mass political meeting on October 13, 1944, all the speeches were delivered by women.

She was eventually elected a member of the Vestry (which administered parochial affairs) as representative for the parish of Christ Church.

Recalling that she had constantly been told that women had no chance, Nellie says she had realised this at the time, but nevertheless had wanted her voice to be heard.

She also remembers that Sir Grantley Adams had been one of the persons who always asked her if she knew what she was doing. But, strong-willed and determined, Nellie was never to be discouraged and always replied to her critics "Yes, I know what I am doing."

Throughout her political career, the diminutive Nellie became known for the fearless and straightforward manner in which she supported a number of legislative measures.

She saw the need for women to have some say in the legislation of the country, and among the measures she supported were ones particularly concerned with the welfare of women, such as better salaries for elementary school teachers, the majority of whom were women.

Nellie also wanted to see increased salaries for hospital nurses and all other government employees, especially those in the lowest paid positions.

Claiming that the method then in use was "undignified to motherhood," she sought to have an amendment made to the outmoded Bastardy Act so that cases might be tried by police magistrate in camera.

Other measures supported by Nellie were: provision of a properly cooked and well-balanced diet to persons who were dieted by Government; better salaries for policemen, firemen and postmen; Government control of all public utilities, so as to afford a cheaper rate for telephone and electrical services; and, the appointment of a general wages board to fix proper minimum wages for store clerks and counter hands.

Today, Nellie is of the opinion that "things have developed so highly, that women have the opportunity to become whatever they want." But she points out that she constantly advises women to cooperate with men and not to get 'top-heavy,' since she would not want to see them trampled.

Nellie herself always had the support and co-operation of her late husband, Charles Nathaniel Weekes.

Together they were actively involved in the hotel and catering business, and were synonymous with such names as the Ritz Hotel, Weekes' Canteen, the Colonial Hotel and the Standard Hotel . . . all once-famous Barbadian

watering holes.

Nellie and her husband were the first people who voiced the opinion that Barbadians should have the opportunity to learn more of their African heritage. She says she is happy today to witness the existence of facilities such as the Yoruba Foundation where such a programme could be taught.

Nellie was also responsible for opening the now defunct Culinary School for Women, was an active member of the Barbados Alliance, an organisation of women; a member of the charitable body, the Dorcas League; and, the initiator of the Choir for the Animation of the Sick.

She has travelled widely, visiting such countries as England, the United States, France, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and Canada, as well as within the Caribbean.

Today, Nellie is not as actively involved in the community as she used to be, for age has taken its toll and she recently had to have her legs amputated. Nevertheless, her past contributions have already earned her a place in Barbadian history.

Barbadian women, in their campaign for equal rights, should pause and pay tribute to Muriel Odessa "Nellie" Weekes.

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Avonda Burrowes is a reporter with the Barbados **Advocate** newspaper. The above article is reproduced by kind permission of the **Advocate**.

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