

Popular storyteller and singer 'Auntie Comesee' turns 100



- By Staff Reporter
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"Auntie Comesee" during a recent picture with family friend Melanie Seaton, daughter of Retired GDF Colonel Pluto Martindale (deceased).

By Frederick Halley

LAMENTING that she hasn't been able to attend church, concerts and the gym over the last year or so because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Guyana-born Pauline Thomas, popularly known as "Auntie Comesee," celebrated a significant milestone on February 8. The famous storyteller and singer who over the years thrilled audiences in Guyana and Toronto, Canada with her unique style, turned 100.

When the Pepperpot Magazine contacted her via phone on Tuesday last, she was ecstatic, her mellow voice sounding as though she hasn't aged a bit since her last interview with this same medium just over three years ago.

Asked how she spent the auspicious occasion, the ebullient Thomas said she was involved in a virtual birthday celebration via Zoom, organised by the Canadian and Ontario Provincial authorities where Member of Parliament Julie Dabrusin of Toronto – Danforth, selected family and close friends played a prominent part.

Thomas was also the recipient of a congratulatory certificate from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, reserved specially for all Canadian citizens who have achieved that milestone. The certificate, signed by the Prime Minister, read: "It is a great pleasure to send you best wishes and warmest congratulations on the occasion of your 100th birthday."

Thomas disclosed that she also received numerous gifts from well-wishers, including the Bishop's High School Old Girls Choir, which she taught for several years, who presented her with an album consisting of her interaction with the members.

Born at Fellowship, Mahaicony, East Coast Demerara, on February 8, 1921, "Auntie Comesee" was a household name in Guyana, featuring prominently at the Theatre Guild while her thrice-weekly creolese skits heard on the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) were massive hits.

During an interview at her Toronto home in October 2017, the still lucid and affable Thomas who lives alone, spoke candidly about growing up in Guyana, her contributions and achievements to the art form, both there and in Canada, and earning a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Toronto at the ripe old age of 79, at the insistence of her daughter Dawne.

According to Thomas, she would not trade the experience of obtaining the Bachelor of Arts Degree in World Religion and Fine Arts Studios for anything, boasting that it was a life-changing one. She explained that while her stint at the University of Toronto was supposed to be four years, she went an extra year to complete Studios.



“Auntie Comesee” during the interview in October 2017.

“What thrilled me was the fact that the young students looked at me as just another student. They accepted me as though we were buddies and did everything together,” she confessed.

Thomas pointed out that “sometimes when I looked outside and saw the snow, I was reluctant to go but it never deterred me and for five years I had to plough through that type of weather. I did it not only for myself but for other women, especially Guyanese women.”

A singer of repute, Thomas was also a member of the University of Toronto choir during her academic pursuit there.

Commenting on her role as “Auntie Comesee,” Thomas said that in order to make the character, “I use to visualise a woman by the name of ‘Aunty Mimi’ who lived in Central Mahaicony in those days. She was a well-known character and I used to imagine myself being her,” she said.

However, it all started one night at a dinner and dance, held at the Theatre Guild in Georgetown, when she was asked to give a “Thank You” speech, using creolese. At first, she was reluctant but decided to, following several requests.

Thomas was immediately “spotted” by a producer from the GBC who asked that she should try out for the station which she readily agreed to. So impressed with her performances and the audience the programme was attracting, she was offered a full-time job at the radio station but refused, citing that she didn’t want to give up her job as a civil servant. Nevertheless, the programme continued until Thomas migrated to Canada in 1980, heeding the call of her daughter, Dawne. Touching on the programme, Thomas disclosed that there were persons who weren’t in approval of it and even wrote letters to the local newspapers

condemning it. “My argument was that creolese was part of our culture. It was more than just a social gig, we must understand it.

“I am not saying it is an official language, but you must know and enjoy your creolese. In my mind, when I am doing it, I think of Auntie Comesee as being semi-literate but a very self-opinionated person. She will give her opinion on world affairs and personal views.

“She is not an unpleasant person, she wants to tell you what to do and how to do it, since she has been down here a long time. When I am performing, I am really not myself. When I am talking creolese, I am not Pauline Thomas at all,” she said.

Prior to leaving Guyana, Thomas worked as a teacher; a profession she joined at age 16, performing duties at Mahaicony Scots School and the Dolphin Government School, before joining the Civil Service as a Child Welfare Officer, describing the latter as her most challenging job in her entire working life. She also worked as an Inspector at the National Insurance Scheme (NIS).

As a Child Welfare Officer, she was responsible for assessing the suitability of persons applying for the adoption of children and make the necessary recommendations and recalled being approached by the Jim Jones cult for the adoption of a child. She, however, pointed out that the application was rejected, since all the requirements weren't met.

A former member of the popular Woodside Choir in Guyana, Thomas performed with the Stadium Singers, a community choir in Toronto and the Chamber Singers, and is also an avid churchgoer at the Main Street Church of the Nazarene.

Thomas' several awards include the African Canadian Achievement in Arts as a classical singer and actor in 2000; the Guyana Folk Festival Award from the Guyana Cultural Association of New York in 2007; the GAMA Storyteller and Actor Award in 2008; and the Guyana Awards (Canada) for Media and Culture, recognising excellence in 2008.

The eldest of eight children, born to Ralph and Edna McArthur, Thomas has two children: Wayne, who is a veterinary doctor who resides in Long Island, New York and Dawne, a retired deputy headmistress who taught at a Community High School in Toronto. She also has two grandchildren. Auntie Comesee's favourite past-time is playing crossword games and she

credits her longevity to working out at the gym and eating healthy and living by the philosophy: "Enjoy when you can; Endure when you must."