

REMARKS BY
AMBASSADOR ELINOR FELIX
AWARD OF LA LEGION D' HONNEUR FROM THE GOVERNMENT OF FRANCE
JUNE 21, 2012

I am extremely honoured, privileged and indeed humbled this evening to have received this Award -- La Legion d'Honneur.

Let me first thank the Government of France for the trust and confidence placed in me by choosing to confer this Award on me. I also take the opportunity to thank the members of my staff of the Office of the Prime Minister, my former staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, the staff at the French Embassy and the Alliance Francaise, as without their support over the years I could not have attained this special recognition.

I also take the opportunity to remember my late parents, my wonderful parents for instilling in me important principles and values and who I know would have been very proud tonight. I recall being sent by my father at the age of 16 to Switzerland for a few weeks to the care of Ambassador Anthony Hill for "exposure". What they taught me was an abiding respect and understanding for the diversity of people and that it is through interaction with foreign cultures that we enhance our own. My gratitude also goes to my two sons, Tarik and Omar, my sister, Hilary, my brothers Rennie and Geoffrey, the members of my family and my friends who have always been there to support me and who came to appreciate and tolerate the fact that I was always travelling somewhere and as we say "gone to foreign".

France formally cemented its presence in Jamaica as one of five countries to establish diplomatic relations with us on the 6th August 1962. Hence it is significant that this year marks not only Jamaica's 50th year of independence but also fifty years of diplomatic relations between Jamaica and France. Over that half century, the relationship between our two countries has strengthened in the areas of economic and technical cooperation as well as in the area of culture. It is indeed within the context of these cultural links that we are here this evening.

Additionally, this year also marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Fete de la Musique, the largest international live music event in the world. It was launched in 1982 by the French Ministry for Culture to promote communication and well-being amongst people through music and is celebrated annually on the 21st June in forty-five countries across the globe. Ambassador Matha has therefore gathered us all tonight to celebrate music – all genres of music – to give you a small taste of la Fete de la Musique. You are all in for a treat "à la française".

I am particularly pleased to have been a part of the efforts to foster the long-standing bonds of friendship between our two countries through the teaching of the French language – still considered "la belle langue de culture" and working closely with the Alliance Francaise. These efforts, over the years, have demonstrated the collective will of the French and Jamaican people to work together for the prosperity of both countries, and also the recognition that it is through language that we better understand and appreciate each other's culture.

My interest in the French language began at an early age, when I entered St. Andrew High School for Girls in Kingston. I was fortunate to have had a fantastic French teacher, who is here with me tonight to share this special occasion. Ladies and Gentlemen, I speak of none other than Dr. Pauline Christie (*pause for acknowledgement*), now retired from the Linguistics Department of the University of the West Indies. Dr. Christie not only taught us language skills, but also saw the importance of us focusing on the cultural aspects of France. As students, therefore, we were encouraged to become members of the Alliance Francaise, which is responsible for promoting the teaching of the French language, as well as the promotion and development of cultural relations. Dr. Christie sought every opportunity for us to listen to French spoken by a native speaker so that we could get the accent right. I still have fond memories of the French Cruise ship which docked in Kingston Harbour when, we as students, were taken to the pier to listen to French being spoken. That event awakened not only our curiosity but an abiding interest in and appreciation for a foreign culture.

That invaluable experience, and the encouragement of Dr. Christie inspired me to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree in Foreign Languages at the University of Toronto, Canada. On graduation, having developed a higher

level of proficiency in the French language and with the desire to impart that knowledge to others, I began my career as a French Teacher at the Immaculate Conception High School. I shall always cherish those years at Immaculate, as some of my students have now blossomed and have become first class professionals, contributing to the building of our nation. I must recognize especially my student Leonie Wallace, who studied in France at my insistence and who has now fulfilled one of my own dreams and has made France her second home.

It was while teaching that I was offered a scholarship by the French Government to pursue a course in the teaching of French as a Foreign Language at the University of Besancon. We were three Jamaican girls accommodated in fine style in Planoise – Marcia Gilbert, now Ambassador Gilbert-Roberts and Lilith Barnaby. This was one of the most unforgettable years of my life; it was one of total immersion in French, participating in cultural activities at the University, meeting other Francophone students from Africa and the Caribbean, and acquiring a love for French wine and cuisine. Amazingly enough, a Haitian student whom I met back then in 1973, Dr. Marie-Jose Nzegogayo, is now in Jamaica as a lecturer in the French Department of UWI.

Upon completion of these studies and on my return to Jamaica, my passion for continuing to share my acquired knowledge and experience inspired me to work in the Ministry of Education and to assist in the development of the Curricula and programmes for the study of foreign languages, particularly French, across the island. This was done inter alia through the organization of the French Drama Festival, which brought together students of French to perform in the field of dance, poetry, and music. Students were also given the opportunity to watch French movies at the Alliance Francaise. In addition, I joined the Jamaica Association of French Teachers (JAFT) in 1975 and served as President from 1979 to 1980. I am pleased that the Association still works closely with our teachers to coordinate various cultural activities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Jamaica has been fortunate to host several international conferences and is the Headquarters of the International Seabed Authority, which is no small feat. Not only were we able to offer facilities to the Seabed Headquarters, but at other conferences, we also provided professionals trained in Translation and Interpreting services. My language training prepared me for the important responsibility given to me of organizing several international conferences, and the coordination of translation and interpreting services. Those conferences have brought together interpreters from the United Nations in Geneva and New York, with whom I had the opportunity to interact, not to mention our own home-grown Jamaican interpreters – and please permit me to boast a bit and single out my schoolmate, Claire Stoessel, and also Marjorie Goulbourne, now Marjorie Robotham, who have done us proud as professional French interpreters for the United Nations.

The Jamaica Association of Translators and Interpreters, established in 1982, is now re-energized and offers a cadre of French and Spanish interpreters. Its President, **Karen Henry**, is with us tonight.

My years working at Jamaica Promotions Limited, JAMPRO also allowed me to promote trade and investment with France in fact Europe in general as well as to work with Pulse Investments in the promotion of the creative industries with France. One remarkable achievement was the participation of the Miss Jamaica fashion model in the Prêt a Porter fashion show held in France, which I was fortunate to attend with my sister, who is a founding Director of Pulse. We were impressed by the remarkable talent of the French fashion designers and models and I remember secretly thinking that if only I were just one foot taller, perhaps I too could have been on that stage! (pause) As that dream clearly is not likely to materialize, my only hope therefore is to work with the Ambassador and Pulse to bring those designers here to Jamaica in the near future.

I now have the honour to continue to work with the French Embassy in my capacity as a member of Board of the Alliance Francaise. This new role will enable me to continue to be a part of the efforts aimed at the promotion of cultural relations between Jamaica and France; as well as to continue to provide the necessary support to our new and dynamic French Ambassador to Jamaica, and the young and enthusiastic Director of the Alliance Francaise.

I feel extremely encouraged that some of the initiatives started many years ago have continued. It is my fervent hope that in the years to come there will be even greater expansion of some of the programmes. I am encouraged by the number of French companies now operating in Jamaica and I am equally pleased at the increased presence of French wines and cuisine. My previous career in the Diplomatic Service has served as a constant reminder that we operate in a global environment and that we must acquire the requisite skills to meet the demands of the 21st

century. I would like to see more Jamaicans working in our tourism sector where we have French tourists. The commencement of a charter flight from Paris to Montego Bay in December 2011 through Look Voyage and the company XL Airways augurs well for increased arrivals and we need to welcome them in en français!

I also have the vision of the French language curricula being developed in a manner that would allow for children to acquire the language skills at an early age especially since we have several francophone territories in our region - Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti and French Guyana. The Government of France is continuing the language exchange programme with the University of the West Indies. That programme helped me then and is helping others now. So I say, Vive la France!

Finally, I cannot emphasize enough my belief that cultural relations are an indispensable element of nation-building, as they not only reduce artificial barriers, but teach us to respect and accept diversity. They bring us together by extending beyond boundaries and represent the fabric on which standards and best practices of societies are built.

I wish to close with a quote from the author, Margaret Mead "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

Ladies and Gentlemen thank you all for being here and do enjoy what I know will be a wonderful evening.