

Eulogy for Donna Keizer written and presented by Harry Cumberbatch

The Keizer family, Distinguished guest, friends, good morning. May I start by first extending sincere condolences from my family to the Keizer family on the loss of their love one. This year Britain commemorates the centenary of WW1 but for us gathered here today there is another reason; this is where the Donna Keizer story began just over 100 years ago on the beautiful Caribbean island of Barbados.

To be precise on the 2 February 1918 Matilda Rowe and Livingstone Keizer had a daughter who they named Donna. She was raised in Villa Road Britons Hill St Michael and her childhood was happy one which she shared with 2 brothers and two sisters who are now deceased. Donna enjoyed her school days at St Matthias and lived a life of relative privilege which was not the same for the average working class Black family.

At the age of 16 she started training as a seamstress which lasted for a few years and then her long career of caring began, first as a student nurse at the Barbados general hospital and then working as a nurse at the Alms house and Dr Bailey clinic. One of her lasting nursing memories was treating the casualties of the Canadian steam ship Cornwallis which was torpedoed by the Germans in Carlisle bay harbour in 1942 during the 2nd world war.

Her next move was to complete a mid-wife course at the maternity hospital in Whitehall St Michael and also found the time to fit in a domestic science course. It was on that course that she was encouraged to apply for a vacant housekeeper post. The high profile show biz lawyer David Jacobs was a regular visitor to the island and was looking for a Barbadian housekeeper to look after his London family home in Chelsea.

Donna was interviewed and got the job but explained that she was heading for England in any case to study for her nursing qualifications. She paid her own fare and at the age of 34 in 1957 Donna left her family and headed for England.

Her experience in Chelsea was very interesting being Black and a house keeper in those days was unusual to say the least. The family gave her a poodle as a present and of course it need exercising so let us pause for a moment and visualise Donna proudly walking around Chelsea cutting some style with her little poodle on a leash. They were many famous people and celebrities she met like Liberace and Eartha Kitt to name a few who were regular visitors to the Chelsea home and their holiday home in Brighton. Only last year I was contacted by the writer and historian Jennifer Gold who lives in Canada asking if I could help her track down Donna as she would like to interview her for a book she was researching on the late David Jacobs. She has also sent her condolences to the family.

In 1961 Donna felt it was time to move on and peruse her dream. She applied to Plaistow teaching hospital for a mid wife course but was turned down. On the second occasion she pulled some rank and got the Royal College of midwifery to support her application and she was accepted.

The second part of her training was done at Forest Gate maternity hospital and after qualifying she successfully applied for a midwife post at the same hospital. Please let us take another moment to picture Donna elegantly riding around the Borough on her bicycle as midwives did in those days on their home visits.

She rose in rank, becoming a staff nurse and then a ward sister where she trained and supervised staff. Donna delivered many, many, many babies in the 18 years she spent at Forest Gate Hospital until her retirement in 1981. It so happen that one of those babies she delivered in October 1970 was my daughter Michelle who now lives abroad and also sends her condolences to the family.

Ladies & Gentlemen there was no stopping Donna after her retirement; she went on to work as a volunteer at the West Ham Lane day nursery and also at the Newham Volunteer Bureau. The next chapter

in Dona's exciting life was with the Hibiscus Caribbean Elderly which she co-founded with her nursing colleague the late Lucy Tate in the late 1980s. She was the treasurer for many years and held a tight reign on the organisation coffers. Hibiscus is still providing services to our community which say something of the foundation that was laid. Donna was on the committee that worked to achieve a care home for the Caribbean elderly which is situated in Romford Road. Four years ago I had the pleasure of speaking with Donna before she received the 2014 Tony Cheeseman Foundation community award which was given for her service to the people of Newham and in particular the African and Caribbean communities.

I would like to share with you the two short messages that Donna left with us at the award event which was.1 'Don't let being Black keep you back' and (2) be conscious of the importance of serving others. (Church, you would agree those are powerful words)

I do not know the true secret for her long life but she was a person of good character, progressive, and had a good mind; she was a faithful Christian and as long as I can remember worshiped regularly at this church. For those of us who knew Donna you would agree with me that she walked everywhere not leisurely like some of us but real real fast. She also did regular exercises well into her eighties and enjoyed all aspects of art especially drawing and painting. Now we know the secret let us follow her example and we will definitely receive a 100th birthday card from the Queen like she did in February this year.

I hope the story of this very proud Barbadian, outstanding midwife and community champion is suitably archived.

Donna leaves behind her son Norman Keizer, grandchildren Jacqueline Annette Keizer and Nicholas Keizer and a great grandson Miles Nicholas

There is much more that can be said of this special lady but for now I would simply say thank you Donna for all the loving care you gave your family, your friends and the wider community.

Donna Keizer may your soul rest in eternal peace and rise in glory.