

Rex Nettleford's legacy lives on

BY COLIN RICKARDS

PROFESSOR REX Nettleford somehow always managed to finish what he started. He did so in life, and now he appears to be doing so in death.

A little more than a year ago the Jamaica-born scholar, social and cultural historian, political analyst and trade union educator was making his way to Toronto to carry out an External Review of the Caribbean Studies Programme at the University of Toronto's New College.

Following that, he was to play a major role in the very first University of the West Indies (UWI) Benefit Gala in Toronto, which aimed to raise funds for the institution's Regional Endowment Scholarships.

Tragically, he suffered a massive heart attack in a Washington, D.C. hotel and died six days later in hospital.

It was, perhaps, therefore fitting that on March 27 this year the Toronto Chapter of The University of the West Indies Alumni Association (UWIAA) hosted an event for the Canadian launch of The Rex Nettleford Foundation, and that it was held on U of T premises, arranged by the Caribbean Studies Programme.

In fact, Barbados-born U. of T professor and author, Melanie Newton, aptly summed it all up when she told the gathering that the UWI alumni event in a way "completed Professor Nettleford's (intended) journey to Toronto" last year.

Newton was standing in for Professor Alissa Trotz, Guyana-born Director of the Caribbean Studies Programme and of U of T, who was out of the country.

About 100 UWI alumni and friends responded to an invitation from Association co-presidents Ferdinand Fortune and Michael Henville to attend the Foundation's launch. Chancellor Emeritus of the UWI and Chairman of the Foundation, Sir Shridath Ramphal, addressed the gathering.

Created on May 28, 2010, the Foundation was officially launched on September 17 at a ceremony on the Mona Campus in Jamaica. The Mission Statement promises that it "will support scholars and programmes that promote the strengthening of West Indian society in the areas of social and cultural development through research, community service and intellectual excellence".

The aim is "to produce young leaders who grasp the importance of public service based on integrity, who have a desire to protect the weak, and who will use their energies and talents for the betterment of humankind".

Sir Shridath and Professor Nettleford worked closely when they were, respectively, Chancellor and Vice Chancellor of the UWI.

"All humanity, and within it Jamaica, the Caribbean, the world of dance and culture, academe in our region and beyond have all lost in Rex Nettleford a rare incandescent eagle," said Sir Shridath.

The Foundation has a nine-person Board which includes Sir Alister McIntyre, Vice Chancellor Emeritus of UWI; Pro Vice Chancellor Professor Gordon Shirley, Principal of the Mona Campus; Vice Chancellor Professor E. Nigel Harris;

Jeffrey Cobham, Chairman of the National Dance Theatre Company, and Cezley Sampson, Executor of the Nettleford estate.

It is intended that a multi-discipline academic Chair be established at Mona in the name of Rex Nettleford. Professor Harris also revealed during the function that there are plans to erect a statue of Professor Nettleford on the Campus, an idea which came from the cultural icon's lifelong friend and fellow educator, Maud Fuller, who has made a substantial donation to get the necessary fund-raising under way.

"I would like it to be of him robed in his academic gown and

B/M Nettelford, Ralston M. "Rex" (Prof.)



NETTLEFORD... died February 2, 2010

poised to dance Kumina," Fuller said.

Fuller, who had a distinguished career at both the UWI and the U of T, was the Founder of the Toronto Chapter of the UWI Alumni Association, which she headed for more than two decades. Meanwhile, Harris, who made a presentation to her at the event, announced that one of the University's Regional Endowment Scholarships will be named in her honour.

Tax deductible donations to The Rex Net-

tleford Foundation can be made through the UWI's Institutional Advancement Division, with cheques being made payable to The University of the West Indies. For more information, visit www.rexnettlefordfoundation.com.

The UWI alumni event was also the occasion for the presentation of a Rex Nettelford Lecture, given by the U of T's Bahamas-born Professor Christian Campbell, a former Rhodes Scholar and



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award-winning poet.

The title of his lecture was, “The Shifting Ground: The Caribbean Elegy and The Diasporic Time of Mourning”.

The Compact Oxford English Dictionary defines an elegy as “a mournful poem, typically a lament for someone who has died”. Campbell also discussed a number of Caribbean poems of this genre, relating them to time – both “Caribbean time” and “Diaspora time”.

“The Caribbean is a Diaspora of Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas,” he said – a phrase which could have come from Nettleford himself.

Campbell also spoke of “sonic Afro-Modernity” and a “poetic manifesto of Diaspora”, and in an interesting visual sidebar showed video clips of Whirling Dervishes in Istanbul and Kumina dancers in Jamaica.

The poet and scholar mentioned a number of literary figures who have died relatively recently, referencing not only the death of Nettleford, but those of famed Martiniquan poet and novelist Aimé Césaire, who died in 2008 at the age of 94; Jamaican playwright Trevor Rhone who died aged 69 in September 2009; UWI Professor Emeritus Barry Chevannes, also a Jamaican, who died at 70 in November 2010; and Martinique’s poet, essayist and literary critic Édouard Glissant, who died in February at the age of 82.

Colin Rickards is based in Toronto, Canada, and has been writing to, from and about the Caribbean for five decades.

B/N Nettleford, Ralston M. "Rex" (Prof.) -



UWI Vice Chancellor Nigel Harris greets Maud Fuller, educator and Founder of the Toronto Chapter of the UWI Alumni Association. Looking on is Grenada-born Jean Augustine, a former Canadian M.P., now the Fairness Commissioner for the Province of Ontario. The occasion was the recent Canadian launch of The Rex Nettleford Foundation. (Photo: Donovan Gopie)