

IN MEMORIAM

GABRIEL LEWIS CHARLES, MBE

1935—1993

Born in the small east-coast village of Dennery, Gabriel Lewis Charles came from a family with a long history of serving Saint Lucia with dedication and pride. He was the son of James Charles, a Senator and Minister of Communications and Works in the late Federation of the West Indies, and brother to George Charles, Saint Lucia's, first Chief Minister.

After leaving St. Mary's College in 1955, Gabriel joined the government service working for the Ministry of Agriculture as an Animal Husbandry Officer, stationed at Vieux Fort.

In 1956, seeking to broaden his horizons, Gabriel left St. Lucia for the United Kingdom. After trying his hand at a variety of jobs, he answered a newspaper advertisement for the position of Forest Worker in the Lake District. The next several years saw Gabriel manning fire breaks, planting trees, and becoming an integral part of the region's social scene. He became an indispensable part of the local cricket team, and wooed his way into the hearts of the local girls, eventually marrying one, Margaret Carter, in 1962. Throughout his time in England, Gabriel strived to better himself academically and, in 1960, he obtained a Diploma in Forestry from the Forest of Dean.

In 1961, Gabriel returned to the land of his birth and spent the next six years as a Forestry Assistant, with special responsibility for the Soufriere range. He and his bride lived at Edmund Forest, cut off from the rest of civilization by lack of electricity and vehicular access. It was during these times that Gabriel oversaw the planting of hundreds of acres of blue mahoe and mahogany trees – forests that remain to this day, and which are living testimony to his environmental commitment and "green thumb." This was also a time when Gabriel began his own family; he and Margaret would ultimately raise four children, three daughters and a son.

Throughout the 1970s Gabriel rose through the ranks of the Forestry Division, serving first as Senior Forest Assistant, and then as its first local Forestry Supervisor. In the years that followed, Gabriel steered the Forestry Division from being one of low morale and little significance, into a full-blown Department that is now a household name. He played a pivotal role in seeing that his staff was well-trained and -equipped, while zealously promoting not only the reforestation of cleared lands, but also the protection of what remained of the island's untouched forest. He championed the plight of the Saint Lucian Parrot, and through his persistence, saw that species declared the island's national bird. In voice and in deed, Gabriel promoted the conservation of all of the island's natural resources. He was a founding member of the local Naturalist's Society, Chairman of the Environmental Commission, and Deputy Chairman of the Saint Lucia Beaches & Parks Commission.

Wherever there was a rallying call for conservation, you would find Gabriel: on the board of the National Trust, at workshops, or attending international conventions. His reasoned voice was respected by all, and his deep devotion to his country won him fame and awards, including

- The Global 500 Honor Roll of the United Nations Environment Programme
- The Fred K. Packard Award for outstanding work in the field of international conservation
- The Les Piton Gold Award for Environmental Management and Resources Protection (1991)

A crowning moment in his career was being the recipient of the MBE (Member of the British Empire) which he received personally from Queen Elizabeth II in June 1985. But, Gabriel was a humble man. The award he cherished most was to know that his efforts were making a difference and that the beauty that is Saint Lucia will be there for the island's children and their children.

In 1990, Gabriel retired from Government Service after serving for more than 35 years, the last 8 of which he served as its Chief Forest Officer. After his retirement, he was re-employed coordinating St. Lucia's participation in the Forestry Action Programme (FAO). In January 1993 he joined his friend of over 15 years, Paul Butler, becoming Assistant Director of the U.S. based *RARE Center* for Tropical Conservation.

On 31 August 1993, while monitoring a *RARE Center* project, Gabriel was involved in a tragic automobile accident from which he died. His last days had been spent walking through "his" forest, watching "his" parrots and enjoying the fruits of his labor.

Gabriel is buried at the Choc Cemetery. His simple grave is marked by two mussaenda trees, symbols of what he lived for, and for what he has left behind. Gabriel's family has lost a husband and a father. Saint Lucia has lost a true "son of the soil."

*The early bird song hangs in the still air,
A benediction on the sleeping land,
No trace of movement yet, no life is there.
The bush glows golden under dawn's soft hand.*

*But slowly, as the sun lights up the scene,
The air clears, and the glow is gone.
The fresh clean shades of early morning green
Emerge like new paint on a palette thrown.*
(Grech 1976)

PAUL BUTLER, *RARE Center for Bird Conservation, P.O. Box 1537, Castries, St. Lucia*

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