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Face To Face: Sandena's Devotion - To Help Our Youngsters Build A Better Future

By FELICITY DARVILLE, first published in the Tribune.

Spend just a few moments around Sandena Neely and you will find an effervescent character with lots of energy to go around. She is positive, joyful and very involved in anything she sets her mind to do.

Sandena has been that way as long as I have known her, going back to our days as young, hopeful seventh graders attending St Augustine's College. Today, she serves as head of the Division of Youth and it makes perfect sense. She will motivate the young people, come up with new ideas and get the job done.



When Sandena first joined the Division of Youth, Ministry of Youth, Sports & Culture, in September last year she received a baptism by fire as she was immediately thrust into the responsibility of overseeing National Youth Month, held during the month of October. That first month of navigation was a joke compared with what Sandena would face during her second National Youth Month. As the commemoration of the month came to a close this weekend, Sandena shared with me how her division reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic and came up with new strategies to reach the young people who need encouragement now more than ever.



ADJUSTING to the new normal, Sandena leading the division of youth in its first Virtual National Youth Month.

"In the midst of this global pandemic we knew we had to find ways to inspire our young people, so the decision was made to host the always anticipated National Youth Month - this time - on a completely Virtual Celebration Platform," she explained.

"The theme spoke to the spirit of the Bahamian people, most especially our youth, 'Resilient Youth: Re-engineered for Re-emergence'. Over the course of the pandemic, we have seen our young people rise up and show their resilience, whether to their studies or to assisting family members to cope through these daunting days and we are day by day seeing them re-engineer, reshape and retool themselves, through online courses, new and innovative businesses, capitalising on technology and carving out their own niche. We are confident that they are re-emerging fully ready to positively contribute to the building of the new normal for The Bahamas."

To celebrate the month, Sandena and her team designed events that could reach everyone, including a Virtual Crazy Praise Party; Virtual Influencers Summit; Online Master Classes; a Virtual Scavenger Hunt; Virtual Youth March; Virtual Youth Parliament and even a Virtual Youth Awards. Patrons were recognised, including retired Chief Superintendent of Police and Youth Band Leader, Ronald Campbell and posthumously, Dr Judson Eneas, veteran nephrologist and founder of the Gentlemen's Club that impacted more than 5,000 young men across the nation.

They also recognized and paid special tribute to Youth Frontline Workers who have been helping in the fight against COVID-19 and working tirelessly over the past eight months. Sandena says they were very proud that the 2020 National Youth Month was “truly national”, including participants from just about every Family Island and there was also had great participation from youth living, working or studying abroad.

“Honestly, it feels as though I’ve been here for years and years... of course I spent many years working closely with the Ministry - from an outside perspective - and I wondered how, if at all, the experience would be different now that I would be a part of the inner workings,” she told me.



SANDENA Neely - then and now.

“To date, it has been a fantastic ride. I have learned so many things, I have been stretched and the growth has been phenomenal, my life has been impacted and enriched by the people I’ve met and the rooms I have had the opportunity to sit in. The decision-making discussions, the jockeying and weighing of positions, the hard and honest conversations. The look on the faces of eager young people hearing great news, the celebratory times with the team that I have the privilege to lead - these are all interesting mixtures indicative of life itself. The lessons learnt are innumerable.

COVID-19 has made the journey all the more interesting and we are navigating our way in this new normal. Our nature is to adapt and adjust; as the Division of Youth, we are doing just that!”

As easy as it is to say, “adapt and adjust”, some people find this very hard to do. But Sandena embraces change. She “thoroughly enjoyed” a 13-year legal career before making an about-face and venturing into youth advocacy and leadership.

She says of her legal career: “It was transformational and foundational all at the same time. I had amazing experiences and learned more about myself than I ever thought possible. The law has helped to shape and fashion my life and I use it now as a foundation upon which I am building.”

Her educational foundation was laid at Romper Room Pre-School, followed by Uriah McPhee Primary School. I remember during our time at Saint Augustine’s College together, Sandena always spoke proudly about her primary school. After we graduated from SAC, She went on to pursue her studies at Bahamas Baptist Community College, followed by The University of the West Indies (Bahamas and Cave Hill Campuses) and then the Eugene Dupuch Law School. She earned her Bachelor’s of Law (LLB) and Certificate of Legal Education.

Ever since her childhood days running around Williams Lane off Kemp Road, Sandena knew she wanted to be a lawyer, as she was captivated by Matlock. Her dreams of higher education were backed by a strong family heritage.

She is of the lineage of Reverend John Julius Brown, originally of Little Farmers Cay, Exuma who migrated to Kemp Road where her maternal grandmother, Annie Delores Brown, and Nellie H McPhee still live side by side in the same yard to this date. Her paternal grandparents, Whifield Joseph “Sheddy” Mortimer and Edith Maud Johnson-Mortimer lived just a heartbeat away, through the same street.

Sandena grew up with all of her family, and recalls that “we showed and shared love, long summer days and the best Christmases ever, and the food - on both sides of the family - was some of the most scrumptious I’ve ever had”.

“Today, with my own family, my husband Pastor Jevon O Neely and Reagan our daughter and son Jevon Jr, our kitchen is named in honour of my paternal grandmother, Mommy’s Kitchen,” she reflected.

“I feel her spirit as I cook delectable delights daily. My parents raised me up so that I can stand on mountains, they literally raised me up to be able to walk on stormy seas. I am blessed to not only call them parents, but with age and maturity, over the years they’ve become my trusted friends.



A COURTESY call on Prime Minister Hubert Minnis with the 2019 cohort of Youth Parliamentarians.

“They have nurtured me in the fear and admonition of the Lord, and they have instilled in me the virtues that the preamble to our Constitution speaks of - that is, self-discipline, industry, loyalty, unity and abiding respect for Christian values.

“I thank them for teaching me the importance of good citizenship and civility. My husband and my children are the wind beneath my wings, and they see the long nights and they help me think through difficult moments and they ground me when I lose my footing. We celebrate and love hard.”

Sandena has a heart big enough to share with the young people who have crossed her path. She has been involved with youth advocacy and youth work for more than two decades. She started out as a Youth Parliamentarian, Youth Ambassador, Member of the National Youth Policy Consultative Team, member and ultimately Co-Chairperson of the National Youth Advisory Council, and all-around volunteer and partner of the Division of Youth from the days at the Collins House, Pilot House, the Pan Am Building and to the present Ministry building on Thompson Boulevard. Mentors such as Charles Beneby, Autherine Turnquest-Hanna, Louise Simmons and the late Patty Michelle Miller and many others took her under their wings. “I love and enjoy youth work, I continuously commit my life to it, it is nation building,” she said resolutely.

“This is what made the transition from the legal field to full time youth work such a full circle moment. Accepting the position to be the Head of the Division of Youth is a divine assignment and the fulfilment of a moment for which I’ve literally been preparing for all of my life. It is my complete honour to serve the young people of our great nation.

“I enjoy working with our Minister, Lanisha T Rolle, the senior leadership team at the ministry and I have the pleasure to work with some of the most dedicated youth practitioners in the youth officers, technical and support team of the Division of Youth. We are a team that is all involved and consistent with our level of output and the drive for excellence.”

In addition to her mentors in youth, Sandena is driven by the support of her “village”, including her siblings, other family members, mentors, colleagues and even peer mentors who have all spurred her to “do more, reach further, go higher and stand stronger”.

Sandena shared this advice with young people:

1. Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can - always - that is non-negotiable.
2. The best way to predict the future is to create it - be disciplined, be diligent and always be creative.
3. Capitalise on the great value of mentorship.

History of SAC Houses

Seton



Seton house was named in honor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Affectionately known as Mother Seton, this extraordinary woman not only founded the first community for religious women, The Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, but was also the first citizen of the United States to be canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church.

Seton was born Elizabeth Ann Bayley, in New York city on August 28, 1774. Despite losing her mother at the tender age of 3, Bethy Bayley went on to accomplish great things.

At 19, Elizabeth married William Magee Seton, who died soon after, leaving her to raise five children as a young widow in the early 1800's. Staying true to her legacy of firsts Seton along with the Sisters of Charity planted seeds for Catholic education in the United States.

This work led to the continued support for Catholic education through the Sisters of Charity and eventually they established Xavier's all-girls school in the Bahamas. This ultimately connected St. Elizabeth Ann Seton to our beloved Alma Mater when Saint Augustine's college, previously an all-boys school, merged with the then Xavier's all girls school forming the foundation of the college as we know it today.

Seton house takes after its patron through its own legacy of firsts. During my time at SAC the athletes of this great house always stood proud in their characteristic red P.E. uniforms as if an internal mirror of our institution. They often led the charge for B.A.I.S.S. and the word around campus was that the house assignments were rigged so that most athletes wound up in Seton anyway. In recent years however, other houses have been stepping up to reclaim their glory in the SAC sports arena.

Alcuin



Alcuin House was named in honor of Abbot Alcuin Deutsch, O.S.B.

Father Alcuin Deutsch, O.S.B., was elected the fifth abbot of Saint John's Abbey on December 29, 1921. He served as abbot for twenty-nine years.

Abbot Deutsch built up Saint John's mission in the Bahamas as a thriving apostolate. The monastic community kept growing. It numbered 168 in 1921, 288 in 1950. After World War II, Abbot Alcuin started spinning off new missions to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Japan, and Kentucky. In the Bahamas he sanctioned the formation of a priory and our alma mater, Saint Augustine's, which continues to flourish under the direction of many of its own great alumni.

Saint Augustine's College and the Monastery were blessed by the Lord Abbot the Right Rev Alcuin Deutsch on March 11, 1947, and many of the Benedictine monks that are responsible for the foundations of SAC were sent to the Bahamas at Abbot Deutsch's request.

From what I can remember during my time at SAC, Alcuin house has always been big on participation, courtesy of Mrs. Russell. You could count on seeing at least one Alcuinite in every event even if that particular Alcuinite had to compete in every event. This dedication to their house has kept them ranking high in interhouse competitions.

Bernard

Bernard House was named in honor of Bishop John Bernard Kevenhoerster, O.S.B.

On May 22, 1931, Kevenhoerster was appointed the first Prefect Apostolic of the newly created Prefecture Apostolic of the Bahama Islands by Pope Pius XI. Bishop Bernard was constantly garnering funds to support the growing Catholic population in the Bahamas. As such he was responsible for rebuilding several churches affected by hurricanes and establishing convents as well as a congregation of nuns.

On January 15, 1941, the Prefecture Apostolic was elevated to the Vicariate Apostolic of the Bahama Islands, with Kevenhoerster becoming its first Vicar Apostolic. He spent a total of twenty years in the Bahamas and, during his tenure, the islands' Catholic population rose from 3,200 (1929) to 13,054 (1954). Bishop Bernard founded Saint Augustine's College and through his impact, inspired many to build upon what he started.

Like Bishop Bernard, the Bernardites tend to get things done. This house has a history of winning and like true sacers even when they lost, they made sure to remind the rest of us of their legacy. Bernard House boast the emblem of a lion and they surely keep their pride alive.

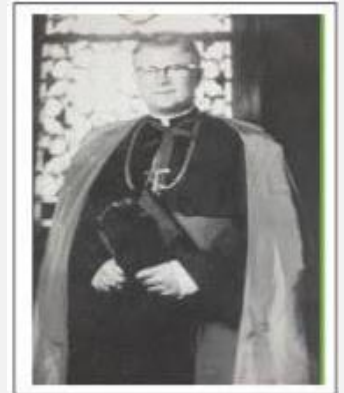


Leonard

Leonard House was named in honor of Bishop Paul Leonard Hagarty, O.S.B.

In 1937, Hagarty was sent to serve as a missionary in the Bahamas. He developed a close relationship with Bishop John Kevenhoerster, who later sent him to the University of Oxford for postgraduate studies. Hagarty became the director of education upon his return and reformed the Catholic school system.

On June 25, 1950, Hagarty was appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Bahama Islands and when it was elevated to the Diocese of Nassau, he became its first Bishop. During his tenure, he greatly expanded Catholic participation in education and social development. The union of Saint Augustine's and Xavier's was achieved in 1967 due to generous financial contribution by the late Most Reverend Paul Leonard Hagarty, O.S.B., Bishop of Nassau.



These days Leonard House continues to excel in academic contests such as interhouse math and speech competitions, while also collecting victories in sports. The legacy of this great house is gaining momentum after years of scarce recognition. As a former Leonardite I can still hear Mr. Pratt celebrating that first Leonard victory in so many years.

— Jervon, Class of 2019

“I Remember When...”

-- A Medley of Events from Grades 7 Thru 12! --

It starts:

As you all know, it all started in September 1988, when Courtney Melody, Ninja Man and Whitney Houston had us rocking. Music was our life and if you were able to chat or rap, you were a super star at SAC. Sound clashes by ‘the Apache Crew vs. ‘Chubb Rock’ couldn’t done in the locker rooms. Indeed, the Class of 1994 had definitely arrived, and we made our presence felt quickly.

But music wasn’t the only thing that had heralded us into popularity; being dubbed ‘bad boys’ did that too. We grew up in the decline of Nassau’s gang wars, but somebody had forgotten to tell the bad boys of L.W. Young School and Fox Hill that the thug life was over, as often times we found ourselves being their victims. Nonetheless, our class was not like the classes that SAC had previously, we never liked being dictated to; consequently, everyone started to ornate themselves with a tough exterior. We all pimped Clark Boutiques, Travel Foxes and Vikings, and if you weren’t wearing Lee or Levi, you were considered square; (amusingly we had a great number of squared persons amongst us). But, truly, like the song said, "bad boy a walk bout the place" and we lived by that song, having huge bawls in the locker rooms, preparing ourselves for whatever the nasty world had in stored for us.

We made such a splash during our first year, that Administration quickly dubbed us “The Worst Class That SAC Ever Had,” a title that followed us throughout our tenure at SAC.

Grade eight:

In grade eight, we started to simmer down. We gelled more and started to form into cliques. Mario Jarrett was still the smartest person we knew, Lakeisha Smith sold her lolly pops, Brock Thompson, Peter Knowles and Lenneth Brozozog still played ‘who can spit the farthest,’ (nasty)! Tresa Cambridge was every eight-grade boy’s fantasy; Cecil Newry and David Cartwright entertained everyone with stale jokes, (in fact, Cecil had his own dance which was a cross between the hammer and lion bounce). ‘Bee-bee’ and ‘Command’ were the games to play, and we cannot forget the dreadful partition wars between 8A and 8B.

Grade nine:

Grade nine went by quickly, the young women in our class were aggressive and were considered smarter, and the guys had to play catch up for a while, but everything was still cool. Grade nine was our formation years; it was during this time that such names as Fat Cat, Helmet, Kido, Cool J, David Rodigan, Air Roberts, Bimini, Auntie Mel and Lisa D came into existence. Sandwiches were known as “P’s” “C’s” or “LTOC’s” and saying sorry to and kissing the grass when you cut cross it was the norm. Black Beauty was the most feared stick in our world and 9c stayed in trouble and knew the stick well, (remember the time that they shouted, ‘burn that baldhead),’ making a teacher cry. Well, making teachers cry was a hobby for us apparently, for it continued throughout our tenure.

Grade ten:

SAC changed for us or maybe it was us who had changed. We were now superstars and were considered SAC's finest; (a self-proclaimed thought). Sean Knowles, whom everyone thought was forty years old, dethroned Mario as the smartest student, Aaron 'G. String' Roberts and Kareem 'Storm' Lilas were the hip-hop all-stars, Chima Johnson and Alphonse Bullard had the art of reggae down pack, and we played football in front of the science block every afternoon. This was the year we were dubbed 'teacher firers,' for we went thru so many so quickly. They all quit, frustrated. Oh well!

Grade eleven:

We finally controlled Red Square. Francis 'Stud B.' Borrowes lived in the Dean's office, and the student council was ran by Ean Maura with his 'thumbs up' campaign, along with Nadia Curry, Norad Morgan and Sean Knowles. There were cliques such as Rhondi and her crew, the Dog Pound and the Brotherhood and Chess was the game to play. Mark McCartney and Omar Williams were mischievously funny. Carol Dames shock the entire school at fun day wearing a black body suit, (Wow! Flash backs) and History Class was the class to be in.

Grade twelve:

This was the most challenging year for us. Administration continuously threatened that we weren't going to graduate and had canceled prom, so we had our own. Dyron Ferguson, Deshon Foxx, Tanya Wildgoose and Devaughan Munroe mashed up the tracks. David Cartwright and Ghandi Knowles pulverized swimming and the basketball court was run by the twelfth grade, in fact they even boycotted playing once. This was also the year of the silly, mandatory six-inch distance rule between male and female students at all times, which was put into effect by administration. Henrea Ferguson was accused of making duck quacking sounds when a certain principal waddled down campus. Francis Burrows and Vanessa Thompson led the cafeteria boycott. Daxton Thompson was considered a jinx, as every girl that he sat next to in class miraculously became pregnant. Tiffany Maycock wrote sexy romance novels; Omar Williams was the most talented artist that we knew, and Antonio Lockhart held his own daily 'church service' before and after school. But then it all came to an end: The last day of school for us ended in the same chaotic and legendary ways in which they had begun. The entire day was spent slacking off, singing songs and signing our class' yearbooks.

The girls followed tradition by wearing their hairs in twos and threes, tied with bright ribbons. They even trimmed their uniforms to make miniskirts and played ring play in the middle of Red Square. Oh, remember there was torrential rain that day, subsequently, with the help of Mother Nature, the boys pulled off the biggest and grandest water fight possibly in SAC's History! The event was complete with water balloons, 'water cannons' and huge new trash bins fill to the brim with rainwater. In fact, some of the 'artistic' boys decided to full their balloons with red paint and actually painted Red Square red. Paint was splattered everywhere, and you know the powers that be did not like that. But what could they have done? It was the last day of school and there was absolutely no time for last minute convocation.

SAC Class of 1989

“We Came, We Saw, We Conquered, We Care”

1983 - An eventful year filled with Cabbage Patch dolls, Fraggle Rock, Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi, Superman III, the sounds of Lionel Richie with “All Night Long”, Michael Jackson with “Beat It and Billy Jean”, and Bob Marley and the Wailers. Yet, we managed to squeeze in the launch of the US Space Challenger and the release of Microsoft Word.



Unbeknown to a group of young 11- and 12-year-olds, just a few years older than a tender and emerging Bahamaland, we too were about to make history. White shirts, stiff grey pants and red ties eyed the blue plaid skirts with white blouses; some innocently with the intent to make a new friend, others, well.... not so innocently. Time would tell as relationships and heart breaks emerged throughout our six years together. Newly relaxed hair, tight cornrows and let's not forget the Jerry Curl. Yes, the hair style that so many of us rocked with confidence - oily, shiny, dripping down on our shirts and blouses, as we wore creased napkins folded over our collars to keep them clean.

We eyed the tall tower of steps to Red Square. From lower campus, it looked intimidating, as upper students guarded those steps with tenacity, daring us seventh graders to climb. Someday soon we would grace those steps. But first we had to overcome many detentions and misconducts from Mrs. Skinner, flying cascades of saliva from Rev. Taylor, our first “F” from Mrs. Fearon, favorite math time with Mrs. Adderley and who could forget our introduction to our all-time favourite “Uncle Lou”. Later, we would encounter the formidable Mr. Forbes, whose ruler, many of our male counterparts befriended; the affable Mr. Lashley, and the incomparable three amigos - Heastie, Dorsett and Carter.

Our Junior years flew by quickly, while parties at Juan, Terry, Tanya M and Sonja's houses kept us occupied during the summer months. Who could forget our first slow dances, our first crushes and summer love; some of them even towards our favourite teachers. Ms. Brookes occupied the minds of many of our young men, flocking to Mr. Gray's choir rehearsals just to get a glimpse of her strolling from her classroom, in the Art Block, to the staff room. Not to be left out, we girls couldn't take our eyes off of Mr. Johnson either.

Our class bonded over the years creating a unique and special connection. We shared a number of firsts. In fact, we earned the name SAC “guinea pigs”. No one could boast of being the first class to get everyone in that year punished by “Uncle Lou”. We brought doll babies to school tying our hair in two, cutting neckties, ripping pockets, guys getting their heads shaved for wearing zig-zag parts in their hair. Our 1989 yearbook was the first to have our Senior pictures printed in colour. Additionally, we were the first to learn and sing our school song, take the 8th grade GLAT and the first to utilise our school crest. Our class was empathetic and generous too. Remember how we felt about Mr. McMenemy day and our donation of the bleachers on the basketball court? We were musically talented also, coining the song “Brudda Henry Muffins” after feeling guilty for helping ourselves (without his knowledge) to some of his treats.



On June 20th, 1989, 150 of us received our high school diplomas. We were elated and looking toward a new path in life, which included the College of the Bahamas, USA and Canadian colleges and universities, the Police Force, and various employment opportunities. But the summer would not end without tragedy when news of the passing of Sean ripped through our hearts. Over the years, we would mourn together as we grieved the passing of 10 more of our classmates - Sharmain, Terry, Roberto, Virna, Sonja, Devin, Edweena, Dominic, Collin, and most recently, this past May - Stanley. We grew closer not only because of fun-filled, joyous memories, but also because of the losses we all felt. We pay homage to our classmates who have gone on before us.

Because of our tragedies, we learned to enjoy every moment together. Boy, could we eat, drink and have a good time. Our reunions were well planned and well attended. Classmates would fly from the USA just to enjoy those weekends of revelry. We kept in touch and with the advent of WhatsApp, there was no distance in our communication. Annual pictures, get togethers at Fish Fry, Travellers' Rest, Kai's house and thanks to Paolo, Graycliff and Humidor, where we ate and socialised. We also enjoyed times spent worshipping together at churches of all denominations. Recently, we celebrated 32 years as a graduating class and can I tell you a secret, "We Don't Look It".

I know that other classes will boast of the greatness of their year, but very few are closer. We take care of each other. If there is a need, we meet it, often times anonymously. If there is a business, we support it. No matter what, we will be there for each other. That's what makes us so unique. Like our motto says "Veni, Vidi, Vici". We came, we saw, we conquered, but most importantly, we care.

Lisa R McCartney (Alleyne)

SAC Class of 1989 and former Editor of "The Beacon"



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