

# WOMAN

## Mind your business!

### Five female immigrants to US inspire author

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**T**HE stories of five Trinidadian female business owners who are immigrants, and who are prospering in their new homes overseas, form the basis of author and Kent State Prof Joanne Kilgour Dowdy's latest literary outing *Minding their own business: Five female leaders from Trinidad and Tobago*.

The book, the author's 13th, highlights the historical legacy of entrepreneurship, self-employment and collective economics through the different experiences, challenges and sweat of these five women leaders of African descent.

The women also impart their methods of modelling, and celebrating the positive impact business people have on society.

#### Early inspiration

"Time is the main ingredient in this journey," Kilgour Dowdy said of her new book.

She began work on it in 2003, from which time she got to know the entrepreneurs as their businesses developed.

"We could all have given up, but that was not going to be the final word on our effort to document these histories," Kilgour Dowdy said in an interview from her Ohio, USA, home.

"It takes a lot of courage to let the story evolve. I did not know that these business women would be successful. I just had faith that they were hard working and it would all come out well in the end. It did work out well, thank the Lord!"

The female entrepreneurs chosen for Kilgour Dowdy's book were not that hard to find, as they were already a part of her social network in Trinidad. Two of the women serve international clients, and one of them has catered events for outgoing US President Barack Obama and a number of international artistes.

"They all trusted me with their stories," Kilgour Dowdy said.

"I could reach them easily because we had a personal connection. That makes a big difference in the way that the work is done over the long haul. I was inspired by their positive attitude and very Trini approach to dealing with their American environment and the business sense that they developed over the years that they worked for themselves."

#### Common link

The women also had a similar background to Kilgour Dowdy in that they went to the same "prestige" schools in Trinidad.

"However, no one prepared them to be independent business owners. That is a personal response to the conditions in which they found themselves."

Her choice to spotlight female business women, rather than men, stemmed from her first case study about a friend who started her business at home and then decided to go out on her own after leaving a lucrative job.

"I was astounded at her pluck and perseverance. Her story got me wondering about other business women who were immigrants and had to make a way out of no way in their adopted country."

Kilgour Dowdy then spent two weeks with a relative in Jamaica who was also running her business from her home.

"I started asking about her history in business and found that there was a well of information that I didn't know and believed that it should be documented."

"Next, I met a friend who was in school with me at Holy Name Convent secondary school, after many years, and she was also in business. So I talked her into doing an interview with me. When I got back to the USA, I asked a neighbour about her business



**AUTHOR AND KENT STATE PROFESSOR:**  
Joanne Kilgour Dowdy

as a book seller, and that was my next interview. I added on another person in 2009 after I saw her work and got to know her history as a business owner. Each woman did three interviews with me. One each year for three years. Then we kept in touch and I got the details of their journey as they proceeded."

#### A tool for others

*Minding their own business* is relevant now, its author believes, especially given the rise in the number of women and men, starting up their own businesses.

"The book is important as a form of documentation. It now exists and can be used by anyone who is interested in the world of entrepreneurs."

"People have to use it and recommend that it be used. I am not in control of those steps. I can make it available and let Caribbean people know that they can now read about themselves in a story told by a Caribbean woman."

Kilgour Dowdy said readers of the book will also learn that family is a major support system when you are living abroad."

"These women did their work in the context of a supportive network. No man is

an island, and definitely being black, female, and an immigrant demands a great deal of "back-ative", as the Jamaicans say, in order to realise success."

Writing "Minding their own business" also gave Kilgour Dowdy an appreciation of the "mettle from which we are moulded".

"I learned that I don't know a lot about my country and the people who I grew up with."

"Digging into the history that Dr Beckles, Dionne Brand, and Dr Susan Craig-James provided in their books was a source of sustenance to me over these many years."

"I (also) deeply appreciate the women scholars who read and wrote important comments about the book. Dr Rebecca Rogers, Dr Wendy Wilson-Fall, Dr Rhoda Reddock, and Mrs Judith Morrain Webb. These sister scholars gave me a great deal of support in their efforts to mirror my work in a way that the public would understand what we created. Community support is the spine of all of these efforts to put positive stories about black women into the world."

#### Driven to inspire

Kilgour Dowdy sees every book she has written as her

"children".

"I send them into the world so that they can meet other people of similar interests and develop ties with a wider community. My students use my books in my classes so that guarantees that my work is being read, critiqued, and passed on to another generation of scholars. That is the criteria that I have established as success for my work."

This month, Kilgour Dowdy will present her book *Olympic Hero: Lennox Kilgour's Story* at a conference on research. Her book, *Olympic Hero: Lennox Kilgour's Story* is the topic of a documentary that she created about her journey in telling her father's story.

"We will be discussing the methods that the filmmaker and I, as the writer and producer, used to create the documentary."

While she has no plans to launch "Minding their own business", Kilgour Dowdy wants to see the women featured in her book, set up their own signing events at their sites so that the book has their energy behind it."

"I want them to invite me to their book signing events. I was merely the instrument of the work. Now, they have to do the next steps in the journey."