

106-year-old Black Nat'l Treasures

WORLDWIDE an estimated 450,000 people are over 100-years-old, including some 9000 in the United Kingdom. Among them are black national treasures, Cassie Smiley and Theresa Stephens, who were born in Jamaica in 1902 – a remarkable 106 years ago. The two centurions, who now live in England, talk about their longevity.

Cassie Smiley Cassie Smiley has outlived a husband, 11 of her 16 children and several other family and friends. She also witnessed the birth of four younger generations. Affectionately known as Aunt Cassie, her 106-year-old mind is still sharp – so is her sense of humour. “Mi (me) too ugly to take picture. Mi ah go bruk (break) the camera,” the West Bromwich resident joked before posing gracefully for photographs. She subsequently said to her youngest son, 68-year-old Hubert Smiley: “If mi never look good, they wouldn’t take mi picture.” Aunt Cassie quickly recited her favourite psalm, The Lord is my Shepherd, a song and poetry. Assisted by Herbie, she is soon lost in memories of life in St. Mary’s parish in rural Jamaica, where she lived until 1992, when her children brought her to England. In Jamaican patois, she said she and her mum, Eugenia, used to get up before dawn and travel, leading donkeys, 15 miles to sell sugar in Buff Bay market in the nearby parish of Portland. She also remembered racing her brother on donkeys called Kitty and Ram John and how they would have to tie out and later bring home cows and donkeys in a nearby pasture. “Sometimes we can’t find the donkey and we can’t go home without the donkey. We have to stand there and look and look. I was trying to be obedient,” she recalled.

She grew up in a Christian household where parties were off limits. “Ah wha(t) name dance? Mi mumma woulda drag mi by mi neck and tie mi like how you woulda tie goat.” She easily remembered siblings long dead, among them her sister Idine. She grinned as she recalled how she disciplined Idine’s husband, John, for being rude to her parents. Laughing, she grabbed John and marched him out of the house. “Him a bawl (cry) out so people run out and when they come out, mi let him go.” Merriment in her eyes, she recounted how she again punished John for using up soap she bought for her mum. “Ah drag him round de house. I ketch (catch) him you see and him start bawl fi murder. Him voice change.” Her grin widened as she reminisced about the time she “lick (hit) him with a stick” for bad behaviour and how John once jumped through a window rather than face her. Married at the tender age of just 15, Aunt Cassie said her husband, Miley, courted her by visiting her home on a horse and talking in front of her parents. “Ah (I) no mi look him. Him stand out the road and see mi and him like mi and come inna de yard,” she remembered. She said her dad, Wilmot Calder, a carpenter and basket weaver, and her mum, Eugenia, did not approve of the romance. “Papa say, don’t give that man that little pickney for him no gwine (going to) care it. And Mama say, ‘Everyday you ah tell them to come out and go look smaddy (somebody). Then one man come now and you ah tell me say no make the man come now.’” She said she and her mum defied her father. Miley was not allowed to visit the house so he would give Aunt Cassie’s mum courting gifts and her mum would pass them onto her. “Mi say mi ah go marry him,” said Aunt Cassie. They were married for 36 years when Miley died in 1953. “Him look after me. Him care mi (take care of me) you know,” she recalled. Herbie said he only heard his parents argue over one thing – the way Cassie managed a shop they owned. “I truss (credit) out everything. Everybody come in and take what dem (they) want,” Aunt Cassie said. “And you never get back any money,” Herbie recalled. “Get back what? After mi no remember who mi give it to?” Cassie piped in, chuckling. She attributed her longevity to her sense of humour and love for God. “Mi also kind to people and mi no cause no trouble,” she said.

Theresa Stephens Theresa Stephens looks like a woman 40 years her junior. Time has started taking a toll on her memory but not on her love of reciting Bible verses and eating traditional Jamaican dishes. Known to many as Sister Stephens, she is matter-of-fact about her fading memory. “What we don’t remember, we just have to leave,” she said. With a matching hat and handbag and a neat skirt suit, Sister Stephens showed her love of fashion, a reminder of the days when she sewed her own clothes. “She does not like dark colours. For her, black means judgement and red means war. She likes the Queen’s colours, like pink,” explained Sylvia Thompson, her “little sister-in Christ” and carer. Sister Stephens also used to crochet. Holding up doilies, she told The Voice: “Is me knit (crochet) them.” The 106-year-old, born June 5 1902, resides in sheltered accommodation in Birmingham. However, she mostly reminisced about her life in St. Andrew, Jamaica, which she has not seen since she came to England in 1964. She remembered trains running in Jamaica and talks about visiting towns in St. Catherine, St. Andrew and Jamaica’s capital, Kingston. She also recalled her aunts, sister and two brothers, one of whom brought her to England. Sister Stephens has outlived them all. “All of them dead but dem never make no scandal. Dem never make no fight. Dem never tell no lie pan (about) nobody,” she remembered. Sylvia said Sister Stephens spent years caring for her church community, both in Jamaica and England. “She was a community person who looked after those who were sick. She would cook dinner and carry it for them. Her favourite thing is helping people,” Sylvia said. Caring was something Sister Stephens learned at home. For several decades until 1963, she took care of her sick mum, Sarah Elizabeth Stephens. A year after her mum died, she came to England where she continued to care for her brother George’s children and other nieces and nephews. She also reached out to those in her new community. She still connects with many through her church, Camp Hill Seventh Day Adventist church. Caring for her mum meant Sister Stephens never married but Sylvia said she did not seem bothered by this. In fact, Sister Stephens, who also never had children, makes it clear that in her day, a woman was expected to have a husband, not a boyfriend. They were also expected to have children only when married. “When you are in line with church, you can’t talk about man. You must talk about marriage. You have to marry,” she said. She said loving God has helped her live this long. Source: voice-online.co.uk