

# Octavia Waight Centre

*25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Address*  
*“Ageing with dignity; living with respect!”*  
*3<sup>rd</sup> September 2011*  
*Elias A. Awe*

*The history of the Octavia Waight Centre is indeed a history with a human face. It is one that is written from the heart, with honour, respect, compassion, dignity and appreciation. It is a history written by and with the collective support of our friends from at home and abroad. It is a history which embraces humanity and stands as a hallmark of what we as a people can do for others as they reach the autumn of their lives. Every day we nourish and live the slogan: “It’s your turn tomorrow; so help the elderly today.” We need to understand that ageing is a constant process where we born, we grow; we age and then we move on..... None of us will be young forever.*

*Why Octavia Waight?*

*Prior to the opening of the home, the centre was named in honour of Octavia Clotilda Waight nee Robateau - one of our first midwives and traditional healers in San Ignacio & Santa Elena at a time when there were no resident doctors or nurses. Octavia, better known as “Miss Acti” was born on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1868 and passed away on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of January 1959. She was the daughter of George William and Jane Elizabeth Robateau. Mrs. Octavia Robateau married to Mr.*

*Samuel Waight and that marriage produced eight children: Austin, Clarence, Lyle, Clifton, Kenneth, Esmond, Ivy and Doris Mae. As we all know, the Waight family is a large family indeed and now you can understand partly why this is so.*

*We stand proudly before you today – not as individuals but truly as members of a community that was able to create synergies and responsible partnerships with individuals, organizations and institutions from at home and abroad throughout the past 25 years, to make the life of this institution a vibrant, robust and dignified home for the elderly. I speak, my friends, of the very people, both men and women, who gave their very best with tears, sweat and sacrifices in helping to mould this place we so love and call Belize!*

*Speaking from the general comments we have recorded over the years by visitors to the home, we can humbly, yet proudly say: we have done well; we have done well indeed! And we share that pride with you who have been there for us in good and in challenging times.*

### *Brief History*

*The history of the Octavia Waight Centre all started in 1984 with the visit of the International Coordinator of Help the Aged International, Dr. Ken and his wife Tsai Tout. In that year they conducted a working tour across the country of Belize and decided that the best site to construct the centre for the elderly, as a pilot project, was here in San Ignacio Town. This was followed by a ground breaking ceremony by Hon. Philip Goldson shortly thereafter. It would be remiss of me not to recognize Dr. Bidar Swamy, our first Chairman and members of the then HelpAge Cayo Committee who were instrumental in having the home established*

*here in San Ignacio. We are grateful indeed to Dr. Ken Tout of Help the Aged International for believing in us.*

### *The Centre*

*After the ground breaking ceremony, in March of 1985, a British team of volunteers under the organization “Operation Raleigh” now known as Raleigh International, assisted in the construction of about 40% of the building designed by British Engineers. The team of volunteers then left in June of that same year.*

*On March 31st of 1986 another team of British volunteers from the Lord Mayor of Birmingham’s Initiative arrived in Belize to continue with the construction of the building. The team consisted of 20 young persons and a Peace Corp Volunteer, David Wheeler, was co-opted as team leader in the construction of the building.*

*As a point of interest, while work was in progress, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Councillor Frank Carter and Lady Mayoress Elsie Carter visited San Ignacio on the 5th of May in 1986 to observe the work of the team. As part of our contribution to the construction of the building, we recognize the support received from the San Ignacio & Santa Elena Town Board (Mayors Domingo Cruz Sr., Eulogio Cano and Rene Moreno), the Listowel Boys Training School, Messrs. Escander Bedran, Gustavo Torres, Robert Hales and other community members. We also recognize the support received from the British High Commissioner, HE John Michael Crosby+ in terms of kitchen equipment and other amenities to run the home.*

*The building was completed in June of 1986 and was handed over by His Excellency, John Michael Crosby, to the then Chairman of HelpAge Belize, Captain Raphael Mason. The dimensions of the building were at the time, 134’ long X 32’ wide and a 6’ X 134’ verandah. This has changed since as the building*

*is a little bigger today and includes an upper floor which serves as an office and a dorm for visiting volunteers.*

*Thereafter, the then Minister of Social Services, Hon. Philip Stanley Wilberforce Goldson officially opened the home on the 5th of September 1986 to receive elderly residents. There were 200 guests in attendance at the opening ceremony.*

*In a very special way at this juncture, we express our appreciation to Mrs. Audrey Courtenay who in 1986 was the Director of the Red Cross Society. Mrs. Courtenay was very instrumental in guiding us in how to manage the new home. She also assisted us in developing a philosophy which emblazons the reason for our existence as a home, a philosophy which we still find binding today.*

*As per our records, the first person to occupy residency that same year was Mr. James Richards and by the end of 1986 we had a resident population of 10 persons coming from the same address, Battlefield Park, Belize City. We certainly did our share for the homeless from Belize City in the initial phase of service.*

*Interestingly, I recently got in touch via email with Dr. Ken Tout who was here present in 1986 for the inauguration of the Octavia Waight Centre. Dr. Tout shared with me via email that he was pleasantly surprised to hear that we were still going, as he recalls that he was advised by Help the Aged International staff in London prior to his visit to Belize in 1984, that he was just coming to waste his time as the movement would not work in Belize. He certainly proved them wrong as 25 years after, HelpAge and the Octavia Waight Centre in our own inaudible drumbeat have proven to be truly effective and efficient and continue to grow exponentially and are in fact, the legitimate voice and heartbeat which advocates, supports and protects the rights and real needs of older persons in Belize.*

*Mr. Tout and his wife Tsai, who are now retired, sent me a message recently saying that they share our happiness and success on this admirable milestone in the history of HelpAge Belize and the Octavia Waight Centre.*

*It is just prudent to pause and single out for special mention, the Government of Belize who has made their contribution over these 25 years which helps us to create that leverage for the Board of Governors to be able to address other developmental needs of the home. We again recognize the strong support received from Minister Goldson in lobbying for that government support in 1987.*

*It was in 1984 that what we now know as HelpAge Belize was formed and organized with district branches called HelpAge Committees. The first Board of Governors for this home was established in 1993 under the watch of Maria Elena Sylvestre who was the President of HelpAge Belize at the time. I applaud Mrs. Sylvestre for making the right move – a move no one can regret. Yours truly was elected Chairman of the Board of Governors on that first election held at the San Ignacio Hotel.*

*Infrastructural development: I will now ask that you bear with me as I give a brief report of the salient developments at the home with regards to infrastructure.*

- After its inauguration in 1986, we started looking at our infrastructural needs and in 1990 a garage was constructed with the assistance of the Belize Defense Force and volunteers of the Listowel Boys Training School to house our first donated van.*
- A pivotal point for the home was on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1989 when we co-opted the services of Mr. Norman Cato, Geriatric Nurse – from the British*

*Voluntary Service Overseas, VSO. Mr. Cato assisted greatly in mapping the administrative/medical schedule to manage the home. Mr. Cato served until 15<sup>th</sup> January 1994.*

- *The grounds which measure 2½ acres was fenced first with barbed wire and then in 2002 with the “hands-on” support and some funds from volunteers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Congregational Church of San Jose, California and through fund raising drives by the Board of Governors, we completed the chain link fence in 2002. This project cost \$49,726.26. It was built on a phased basis which took over four years to complete.*
- *The Laundry House and a walkway were done in 1994. Mrs. Miriam DeShield was very instrumental in assisting with this project.*
- *A gravity-fed water system with two vats of 4,700 gallons and 1,000 gallons respectively were installed in 1995.*
- *In 1998 we fund-raised and tiled the entire floor of the centre at a cost of \$12,000.00.*
- *With the support of the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives in 2001, we extended the dining hall to also include an upper floor to house the office.*
- *In 2002 we constructed a staff dorm with all facilities for staff convenience.*
- *In 2002 what was the garage then was converted into what we now know as the Therapy Centre. This was refurbished and equipped with therapy equipment and necessary bathrooms in December of 2002. The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives assisted with funding for the equipment.*
- *In 2005 the Board constructed a multipurpose room on the upper floor of the building to serve as a dormitory for foreign volunteers.*
- *In 2007, with the financial support of the Social Investment Fund and our own fund raising activities, the complete roof of the building was given an*

*overhaul by raising the roof for adequate ventilation and the construction of a steel structure to serve as a hurricane proof building. The complete electrification system was also rewired. We are very grateful to the Cayo Center for Employment Training CET and to the then Santa Familia Monastery for providing free accommodation to the 24 residents during this project.*

- *In January of 2007 we also constructed a steel-structured roofing for the semi-circled plaza at the home at a cost of \$16,400.00. This project was made possible through funds bequeathed to the Octavia Waight Centre by a relative of the late Mrs. Octavia Waight who passed away in England. We extend our kindest appreciation to Ms. Cheryl Barton (UK) and Mrs. Rita Waight who were instrumental in arranging for the transfer of the funds.*
- *Since 1996 to 2010 we have constructed three gazebos or round shelters with walkways and holding bars with the support of the Cashel Diocese of Ireland, Pine Lumber Co. and fund-raising drives of the Board of Governors. The largest gazebo was completed in 2010.*
- *In 2005, three medical professionals from the University of New Hampshire, Joyce Capiello, Kerryellen Vroman and Sue Levandowski for the first time in Belize, did a comprehensive assessment of the Octavia Waight Centre as well as the other two homes (Sister Cecilia Home in Belize City and Golden Haven in Hattieville) to identify weaknesses in health care, adequate staff-resident ratio and to take an inventory of the facilities available for elderly care. We have been following up on their recommendations.*
- *We have developed a strong partnership with Rotary San Ignacio & Santa Elena and Rotaract. Just recently, Rotary donated a new commercial washer and dryer. They have also assisted us with mattresses, bed sheets etc... and*

*with a spanking new Toyota Van valued at \$73,000.00. Some of these projects were done in collaboration with Rotary International. As for Rotaract, they too assist us with small projects and provide special banquets for the residents on special occasions.*

- *Early this year, the “String & Voices Unplugged” youth group conducted a concert on our behalf where they raised \$6,000.00 for the Octavia Waight Centre. This sum was allocated for the Therapy Unit Building Project.*

### ***The Way Forward***

*“To provide the elderly with an environment that enhances dignity, self-esteem and physical and mental wellbeing.”*

*According to the World Health Organization, “in almost every country, the proportion of people aged over 60 years is growing faster than any other age group, as a result of both - longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates.*

*This population ageing can be seen as a success story for public health policies and for socioeconomic development, but it also challenges society to adapt, in order to maximize the health and functional capacity of older people as well as their social participation and security.”*

*With this in mind, the Board of Governors decided to build what we will initially call a CONVENTION CENTRE to do fund-raising activities and as time marches on and the economy improves, we will be open for discussion with Government in the event they would like to have another wing of Octavia Waight Centre in operation.*

*The building structure measures 160 X 30’ and will have its own bathrooms etc... In a way, this is part of our long-term strategy. The building will also serve as a*

*hurricane shelter after we get NEMO's approval. We will also continue to conduct "hands-on" training for our staff members with the support of local and foreign medical specialists.*

*Facilities, comfort and health:*

*The maintenance and improvement of the facilities has been constant and dynamic. All home equipment (refrigerators, stoves, beds, linens etc...) and kitchen utilities have been purchased or donated and replaced many times with the support from our friends from at home and abroad.*

*We also recognize that comfort comes not only from the consumption of food and water but it is also enhanced by physical exercise and exposure to clean air, hence the residents at the Centre have access to the Therapy services and outdoor facilities provided by the Gazebos, the plaza and healthy exercise in the garden and walking around the grounds for those who are able to do so. Consideration for the less able is also recognized, hence the provision of paved walkways with galvanized holding bars leading to the shelters or gazebos. These outdoor facilities provide an environment for tranquil, peaceful rest and meditation for the residents. It is very heart warming to see the elderly enjoying these facilities during hot hours of the day.*

*There is our 100 year old piano that provides old time music which brings a sense of nostalgia and consolation to the heart and spirit of our residents.*

*The tasty and healthy meals provided for optimum health have all been positive due to the assistance from health experts, donations of fruits and vegetables from organizations and individuals. The locally produced fruits and vegetables from the garden have also added fresh taste to the daily menu. I must add here that for the*

*last few years, Mrs. Paulita Bedran and just recently the Spring of Life Ministry provide 1 pot of soup weekly (on specific days) for the residents.*

*The working visits of the medical corps and other health specialists both locals and international to the centre have also added to the physical well-being of the residents. As a testament to good health and care giving, our eldest resident is 103 years of age and still going. She is Mrs. Camila Espinoza who is here with us today.*

*We take pleasure in thanking and commending Nurse Dorothy Roth, SRN for serving in a voluntary capacity at the home since 1999. She gives the home three days per week of her voluntary service looking mainly at the management of the Therapy Unit but also assisting with nursing services. We also acknowledge the altruistic contribution made by Margaret Juan, SRN from the Good Shepherd Clinic who also visits the home at least twice per month to assist the residents with medical support.*

*An important area that has also been addressed is the emotional health of the residents. To this end, social gatherings, like birthdays and other holidays have been observed, endeavoring to involve the residents to the extent possible. Outings like picnics and site visits including walkathons have also been encouraged so as to have an interaction of the residents with the greater society. The many visits to the Centre (resident relatives and others, especially school children) have enjoyed sharing their moments and listening to the elderly and no doubt the residents enjoy the encounter. In the year 2010, for example, 4,674 visitors shared their moments with the elderly.*

*The spiritual needs of the residents is also attended to significantly by the various religious denominations: Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Mennonite Church, Evangelicals, Seventh Day Adventists, Nazarenes, Rock of Refuge Church, Presbyterians, Congregational Church of God in Christ, Pentecostals, Jehovah Witness, Cornerstone Foundation, the Baha'i Faith and Mormon Church of God.*

*The comfort, the needs and care of all the residents have been attended to by a dedicated and efficient staff that has been trained and has learned by experience to care for the elderly and to share of themselves unstintingly with the residents.*

### *The Partners*

*Reflecting on all the improvements that have taken place and all the activities that have been carried out, both for staff and residents, the resources expended: be it material, monetary, intellectual, emotional and spiritual has been a feat of its own. It was no doubt daunting and challenging for the Board of Governors and staff of the Octavia Waight Centre.*

*As you will appreciate, it is a prodigious task and commitment and yet it has been accomplished. This of course was only possible, thanks first of all to the Board and staff of the home whose dedication to the cause and diligent effort ensured the constant availability of funds to operate the centre; secondly and very importantly, thanks to the Government of Belize for the annual subvention to the Centre. Thirdly but not least significant, thanks to the contribution of the professionals in the medical field, organizations and other institutions, business and individuals who manifested their self-sacrificing spent of sharing, laboring, caring and donations. Without their support, commitment and dedication and diligence, it would not have been possible “to provide the elderly with an environment that*

*enhances dignity, self-esteem, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well being.” It would not have been possible to provide basic needs of the elderly such as shelter, warmth, food, sanitation facility, companionship and most of all – Love. Finally, without that care and support, there would have been no reason to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Octavia Waight Centre.*

*In closing my friends, I say: “At the end, everything begins anew, the present beckons our efforts to achieve and convert the future into a better past.” Twenty five years after, we have done just that but the journey continues!*

*I thank you.*