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ISSUE 2 • 2018 • US \$2.95





# HELPING TO INSURE PORT OF SPAIN'S FUTURE

Editorial Vernon Ramesar Photography Jermaine Cruickshank

"I'm not a polarizing figure. I've never courted controversy. The job was not about status, but about community service," says Port of Spain's 46th Mayor, His Worship Mr Joel Martinez.

This 59-year-old politician, with the Hispanic-sounding surname but who doesn't speak Spanish, is affable, enthusiastic, and overflowing with ideas for improving the capital city. He's also a devoted family man who shows his commitment by ensuring that his four children enjoy a better childhood than his own, which was fraught with economic hardship.

His early years sound almost Dickensian, but to hear him tell it, they were perfectly fine. In our three-hour chat at his City Hall office, three floors above Woodford Square, he's perfectly comfortable recalling the details.

His mother, who recently passed, was a Venezuelan socialite with Trinidadian roots. She conceived him out of wedlock and moved to Trinidad. She had five other children—two boys and three girls. They stayed together as a family through his mother's efforts and with his help.

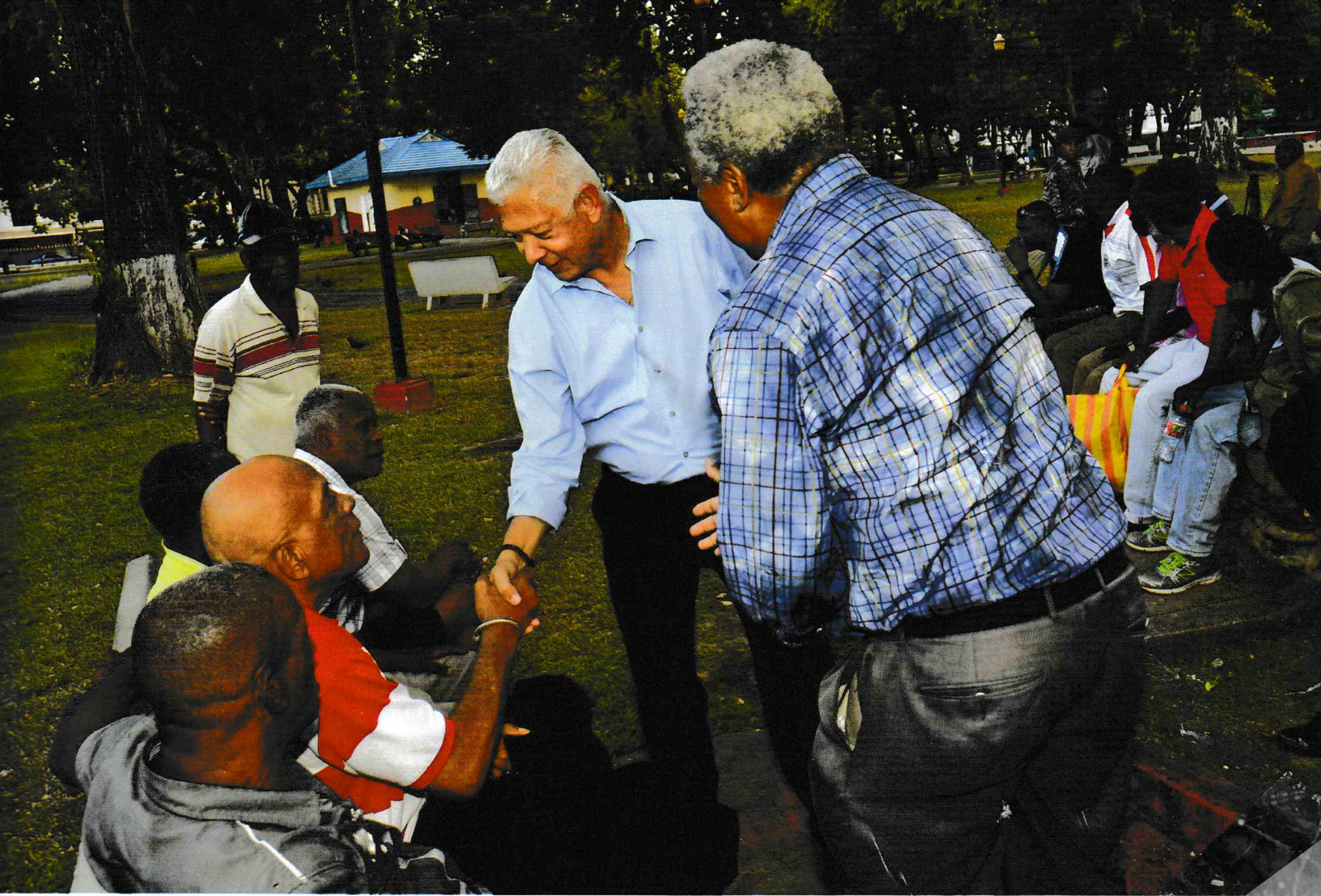
"Poverty was no stranger to our family, and seeing that I was the eldest, I felt I had a responsibility to my family, especially my siblings, to lead by example. I assisted my mother with our financial obligations. We moved a lot as a result of not being

financially stable. My stepfather, who was an educated man, was a teacher at Progressive and sold insurance, but he tried his best to maintain a standard of living that became difficult at times, as having a big family in those days posed a challenge."

The absence of any strong father figure in his life appears to have pushed the young Martinez into stepping into the role for himself and his siblings. "I went to school, I finished and got one pass (commerce), and that was it. I started to work at a young age...from age 11. I worked at a store called Awai's on Fridays and Saturdays throughout my school life. I worked at the Kapok Hotel cleaning windows and sweeping their car park on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays after school," he remembers.

He found his way into a shipping job at age 17, and a year later moved out of the family home into an apartment he shared with a friend. His salary barely covered the rent, forcing him to work overtime—which literally paid off, as he bought the apartment he was living in and gifted it to his mother. By that time, his brothers were able to contribute financially towards the mortgage. He was 21.

"I moved out a couple months later because I was too independent. I did the part I wanted to do for my family, and now I needed to work on me."





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Around this time he discovered one of his great passions: the insurance industry. He discovered that by working as hard in insurance as he had in shipping, he could achieve more using the same amount of time. Today he runs a branch of Sagicor in Chaguanas with 52 employees.

Mayor Martinez says his entry into politics in 1990 was a natural extension of the civic responsibility he learned working in insurance, describing it as a “natural fit”.

He served as councillor for Paramin/Maraval for two decades, including a 14-year stint as Chairman of Finance at the corporation. Following the PNM’s defeat in 2010, the writing was on the wall.

“I had enough of that and decided to focus on building an educational portfolio for my kids.” He reveals that when he was younger, he promised his children that no matter where they were in the world he would pay for their education. It’s a promise he takes very seriously.

A phone call in November of 2016 from the ruling PNM saw him once again returning to politics and local government in the role of Mayor. He was circumspect about the offer at the time. “I called a few friends, because my first take on it was to say no.” He was appointed as Mayor on December 13, 2016.

He quickly realized the gravity of the position. “The role of the Mayor of a capital city carries with it greater responsibilities than the role of other mayors. It is the home of our diplomatic corps; the artery of the history of the capital city resides right here in Port of Spain, which tells the story of the city’s positive transition.” As mayor of the capital city, he is invited to international summits and conferences. “The capital city leads by way of example in promoting sustainable growth and development for other municipalities. You’re the ‘first citizen’ in the city of Port of Spain.”

He describes Port of Spain as a “gem we don’t know how to manage” and has several ambitious plans for changing that situation over time. He seems to draw from his experience in insurance in approaching the situation.

“How do I get people to change? The buildings can’t paint themselves, so my job is more of an inspirational one. How do I inspire people to act? I have a team of committed council members—let me inspire them first.”

Mayor Martinez has several plans to beautify the city, including the cleaning of major streets and possibly planting poui trees along Broadway. He visualizes a boardwalk running along the waterfront from Invader’s Bay to Sea Lots. These are ambitious plans, given the hindrances faced by previous mayors in getting a great deal accomplished.

Martinez smiles and says that’s not going to stop him.

“I have a chance to fix something, and if I failed to do so it would haunt me. If I can fix it, let me try. I might run out of time—but at least I attempted it.” ■