



JUST ASKING

INTERVIEW BY NEELY TUCKER

Shireen Lewis, founder, SisterMentors program

Shireen Lewis, 55, is founder of SisterMentors, which aims to mentor girls from their early academic years through college graduation and help women of color to earn doctorates. The program has helped 26 women to go to college and 56 to earn doctorates. A native of Trinidad and Tobago, Lewis immigrated to the States after high school. She earned her doctorate in French literature from Duke University and her law degree from the University of Virginia.

I just found out that Billy Ocean is from your home town, Fyzabad. Inquiring minds want to know: Are you, in fact, the “Caribbean Queen”?

I love Billy’s music! I have to say I don’t know who he was thinking about when he wrote that song, honey, but I don’t think he was talking about me.

Nicki Minaj, Heather Headley, the list of Trinidadians is ...

We are *everywhere*.

What did your parents do?

My father, he started out being a carpenter, then he worked on an oil rig. Texaco, that was the major company where we lived. Later, he was a policeman for Texaco. My mother was better educated — she had a high-school degree — but she was a homemaker. It was always clear that we were coming here for university.

You have a professional interest in literature. V.S. Naipaul is from Trinidad. “Miguel Street,” “A House for Mr. Biswas” — were these big works for you?

Naipaul is an enigma for Trinidadians. He loves Trinidad and hates Trinidad. I grew up



reading a lot of Charles Dickens — you know, the British colonial experience. I gobbled up all of his books in high school, then transitioned to books in other languages, often in French. Balzac, Simone de Beauvoir and many from the Enlightenment period. Then literature from Léopold Senghor from Senegal, Paulette Nardal from Martinique. ... I wound up feeling closer to Francophone writers talking about the black colonial experience than I did to Dickens.

How did SisterMentors come about?

When I was working on my dissertation at Duke, I relocated here, since I had a lot of friends locally. I was working on a very difficult chapter and I thought, “Why am I doing this in isolation?” This was the fall of 1997. I had grown up in Pepper Village, Fyzabad. Community was the thing. One of my fondest memories was when people would help build each other’s homes. So there was a bookstore here then, Sisterspace, and I volunteered there, so I asked them about getting women of color together, women who were working on their doctorates.

New Yorkers tend to think they’re the epicenter of the United States and that the rest of us are just hicks. Nigerians think the same of themselves in Africa. Who are the New Yorkers of the Caribbean?

I would say Trinidad and Jamaica. We both think we’re just *it*. I remember growing up, even having never left the island, and all of us saying, “Oh, those small islands, St. Vincent” and so on. Then I got to the United States and said, “Wait a minute — we are *all* small islands.” ■