

//Book Of Life//

Wake the town and tell the people, the Trench Town Reading Centre is a beacon of hope providing opportunity to the residents of reggae's troubled birthplace.

Words: Sarah Bentley

It's break time at The Trench Town Reading Centre and the place fizzes with energy and enterprise. Inside its canary yellow walls kids tear about excitedly pulling books from shelves. A little boy has been sent out to the veranda – “No eating in the classroom” – where he sucks on a mango oblivious to the soppy orange fibres covering his face as he eyes a couple of youths who've been set to work planting a flower garden, such a concession to environment alien to most Trench Town residents. Two little girls, no more than four years, are coming to blows over a Sea Life book. Hands on hips they state their claim to the tome in a heated exchange of thick-patois like a pair of vexed teen hoochie-mama's arguing over a boy. Before the duo come to blows Happy, the centres librarian and teacher, interjects with a few attention-grabbing handclaps. The kids obediently melt into a cross-legged position on the floor. As she commences reading the tussling mini-diva's listen intently with their arms wrapped around each other. The Sea Life beef is already forgotten, if only all of the community's conflicts could be solved so easily.

The Trench Town Reading Centre (TTRC) is an oasis of progress, positivity and peace in one of Jamaica's most tumultuous communities. Here gun battles are so frequent only the most fervent hit the Jamaican newspapers, the most recent being in May 2008 when two policemen patrolling the area on foot were shot dead. Although known as the birthplace of reggae and place where legend Bob Marley lived “inna government yard”, its reputation for lawlessness, gang warfare, extreme poverty and deadly political divisions has long transplanted any romanticised notions of ghetto life. Although such negatives cannot be refuted there is another part of the saga that rarely gets told. A tale of friendship, pride, resilience, compassion, humanity and, from both outsiders and residents, dogged determination for progress and change. Since 1993 the TTRC has been an on-going chapter in that story.

Located on First Street across the road from Bob Marley's Culture Yard and a food hut that serves the cheapest tray of Ital food in Kingston (rice and peas with bean stew for a bargain JA\$70), TTRC is a library, school and 'community cornerstone', a place where, in the words of founder Roslyn Ellison, “Life is enriched by reading and learning.” Over the years the centre has been a hub of activities including adult literacy classes, reading buddy groups, conflict management seminars, art workshops and black history lessons. Although initiated by a group including Trench Town residents Michael Rose, Veego, Denis James aka Massive Dread and Vincent Graham aka Chubby (the latter two men sadly lost to community conflict), it's Canadian national Roslyn Ellison that's been the sole, consistent driving force behind the centre from inception to present day.

Understandably many locals were suspicious as to why a white Canadian woman would waltz into Trench Town and become so involved, yet over the years she has won their trust and respect. Through a combination of generosity, door opening and tough love she's bought lunches for hungry people, put orphaned kids through school, given loans to women to buy water coolers to start roadside stalls selling box juice and employed local men to paint and build. “No one wants to be dependent,” she says. “Most people would rather work but sometimes you need a leg-up. Also I'm not sympathetic to those who waste chances. If I lend money for someone to do something constructive with and

they waste it, I blow my stack. It's not fair, that's taking an opportunity away from someone else that would have used it properly."

What's special about TTRC is that it has no hidden agenda. Unlike many of Kingston's youth projects, its books and programming are strictly secular, "We don't won't souls, just focused brains," jokes Ellison. Because the bulk of the funding has come from abroad either personally from Ellison or via Friends Of The Trench Town Reading Centre, an NGO she set up in hometown Vancouver, no one Jamaican political party can lay claim to it. Therefore the centre is a neutral space that has remained open, even when schools and public transport links have closed, during intense periods of violence. Apart from a one-off investigative visit from a gun-toting police and army force, it is yet to bare witness to a major altercation.

Another facet of the centres uniqueness is its quality. Unlike Kingston's main public library where the children's section is notably outdated and full of pictures of white kids, the books at TTRC are contemporary and selected to ignite pride in Caribbean adults and children. Volumes on Rastafari, Marcus Garvey, African history and reggae sit close to brightly illustrated children's tomes full of Caribbean poetry, wildlife, flowers and fauna with images the kids can identify with and be inspired by. Accompanying this impeccable catalogue the centre has electric fans, comfortable chairs, freshly painted walls and a newly planted flower garden, 'luxuries' which Roslyn has often been challenged about. "The amount of times I've heard, 'Fans – what do they need fans for?' as if it's some kind of outrageous luxury to want people to learn in comfort."

For both adults who slipped through the educational net (according to the Jamaican Institute of Statistics 21% of the population are illiterate) and low-income parents, TTRC is a much welcome anomaly. At all ages education in Jamaica has to be paid for. Preparatory schools charge fees between JA\$450-JA\$2500 per term, this figure not including books, uniforms, bus fares and lunch. Minimum wage in Jamaica is JA\$3700, raised recently to this figure from JA\$3200 in January 2008. Consider this nominal figure and the fact a vast majority of Kingston's garrison residents eek out an 'unofficial' living as roadside higglers, car mechanics, odd-job men/women, bicycle repairers, shoe menders and the like, the kind of sums needed for education are out of reach for a vast majority and consequently children from low income families have a sporadic education, sent to school when guardians 'have a lickle money' and kept at home when they don't. Most Trench Town families, especially since the recent 30% increase in the cost of basic food such as baking flour, rice and chicken back, are struggling to pay even the most basic of living costs, never mind school fees.

The exact geography of Trench Town is somewhat ambiguous. Located in district 12, West Kingston a mile or so below Half Way Tree Road, the unofficial divide between up and downtown, most global maps would have you believe it is the entire area between Orange Street, Maxfield Avenue and Spanish Town Road. In reality this area, home to over 25,000 people, is a myriad of garrison districts. According to the Jamaican Planning Institute Trench Town 'proper' is 5th Street up to Columbus and is home to 7050 people. It is flanked immediately by Rema, Rose Town on the east, Arnett Gardens aka Jungle to the north, Denham Town to the south and Matthews Lane aka Matches Lanes to the southeast, all communities with the same troubles – abject poverty, ruthless gangs, Don power struggles, cheap cocaine, unsettled vendetta's – as Trench Town. Contrary to popular belief the area wasn't named after the large open plan sewer that runs down Collie Smith Drive but from James Trench, an Irish immigrant whom once owned and

used the thirty-three acre plot of land where Trench Town now resides to rear livestock.

Appalling living conditions has been the warp and weft of Trench Town ever since it became a residential neighborhood. Post 1870 a period of mass migration ensued with people from rural Jamaica arriving in Kingston at such a rate by 1938 the cities population had mushroomed by 300%. For decades the then British ruled government failed to engage in any kind of urban planning initiative, Kingston's burgeoning new populace abandoned to their wits and ingenuity alone to survive. Many set up home in the squatter camps of Trench Town and nearby Dungle, a slum on a garbage site on the waterfront of downtown Kingston.

Finally between 1945 and 1951 Trench Town was 'redeveloped' with a series of government built housing projects, the now notorious tenement yards. These structures, most surrounded by zinc fencing, comprise of a series of cramped singular rooms set in a square formation around a central yard with communal cooking facilities and a water pipe. As Jacob Miller pointed out in his 1976 classic *Tenement Yard* – "Too much watchie watchie watchie, too much su-su su-su su-su" – they were communal affairs with no scope for privacy. At the Culture Yard site Bob Marley had his own four by seven foot room but in many cases whole families squashed inside a single room at night to sleep and many still do today. Tenement yards shake to a relentless 24/7 soundtrack of life. Hungry belly *pickney* cry. Frustrated baby mothers wail. Ancient beds creak under vigorously copulating couples. Goat's bleat and chickens cluck. Grannies wash, scrub and beat. Late night visitors issue thundering knocks and 'Pssssss'. Dancehall pumps. Youths sing. Police raid. Arguments erupt over anything - a stolen cigarette, an unwashed pot, a minor disrespect. This incessant cacophony explains why so many ghetto youths spend their lives '*deh pon de road*', their homes affording them little space to breath never mind a place to study.

Although the hardship of living in poverty cannot be denied, it wasn't until Jamaica's leading political parties the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) and Peoples National Party (PNP) began employing the brutal tactics of arming street gangs to enforce party loyalty that the situation in Trench Town and surrounding areas went from bad to barbaric. After Jamaica was granted independence in 1962 the JLP was in power. Legend has it the CIA assisted the party with whatever 'tools' they needed to keep the communist sympathetic PNP out of office, these tools coming in the form of huge caches of M15's. Fighting fire with fire the PNP acquired arms from entrepreneurial soldiers and foreign dealers and gradually downtown Kingston was carved into party-loyal, Don and gang ruled turf. Historically Trench Town is a PNP area and neighboring Rema JLP, this pointless division (the community failed to thrive under either government) claiming thousands of lives over the next four decades.

Although today the link between Kingston's gangs with politics is comparatively tenuous (they're more concerned about drug hustling, international arms deals and reputation than politics), the wounds of the politically violent years run deep. Party affiliated graffiti – the green bell of the JLP and orange head of the PNP - still litters the walls of Trench Town and Rema. In the September 2007 elections there were eight deaths directly linked to a political campaign, a staggering improvement on the 1980's election death toll of 800 but still too many. There were 1574 murders recorded in Jamaica last year, a disproportionately high figure for a country with a population of just 2.7 million and the direct inheritance of a population whom for years were governed by the gun. Don culture reigns supreme with many community members having more faith in these self-elected

community leaders than their local MP or police force. Ghetto youths have been desensitised to violence. The aptly named Fatherless Gang, a crew of trigger-happy Trench Town youths who've lost their father's to local violence, now channel their pain into meting out some ghetto justice of their own, as do Rema's Action Pak and Lock The City crews.

Despite the recent police slayings the current vibe in Trench Town is peaceful. Children play on the street, the schools and shops are open and people go about their business with a sauntering determination and an ever-present wicked sense of humour. Things could change at any time though and the community lives on a knife-edge. Everyone has lost loved ones to gang violence. Everyone has been caught in crossfire and has a tales of dodging bullets by cowering behind walls or dragging themselves along the ground, army Comando style. The same tots now innocently playing tag know the names of the most sophisticated weapons of street warfare and can identify the different guns – M1 Enforcer, the Thompson, Israel Uzi, 357 handgun, Heckler & Koch, Bushmaster, 303 Rifle, AK15, M16, Mark 10, 357 handgun – simply by listening to the shots as they lie in bed awake at night. All too easily these kids can fall into the kind of lives led by the Fatherless, Lock The City and Action Pak posses. "Statistics say 90% plus of murders are committed by boys aged between 18-30 years old, 86% of which are illiterate and fatherless," says Ellison. So much more than a library, The Trench Town Reading Centre is on the frontline of life path intervention.

The TTRC was the result of a reasoning session in the then undeveloped Bob Marley culture yard. Roslyn Ellison was visiting Kingston and had been dropped off at First Street by a Jamaican she'd been touring with whom told her the imitable phrase, "Me soon come." She has no idea why he dropped her there – "I guess he needed to use the car for something" – but fortunately he did as during the wait for his return she reasoned with locals about what could be done to help community members, "Find a path forward out of the cycle of violence, poverty and exclusion," and from these talks the TTRC was born. Unlike many well-meaning foreign altruists Ellison put her money and time where her mouth was and five weeks after the initial discussion, with a team of dedicated community members, the centre had opened with an official ribbon cutting ceremony in the old 15 by 20 foot space rehearsal room of the dilapidated Vin Lawrence Park Building. As anyone who's tried to get anything done in Jamaica will realize, this was little short of a miracle.

Between 1994 to 1998 the day to day 'runnings' of the centre was taken care of by Devon Beckford, known locally as Ziggy, with Ellison travelling back and forth between Kingston and Vancouver where she worked as a teacher and did the occasional real estate deal, money she needed as the centre was almost entirely funded by her. Other than dig three holes in the run up to the 1997 election the government provided no assistance until 1998 when after much lobbying a new structure was built. Ellison is hugely diplomatic about this development, praising the structures size and various uses – fitness, concerts, lunches – despite the fact it had no walls. Yes you read that correctly, the government erected a building to be predominantly used by youths in a violence-ravaged area with no walls. More lobbying followed but the wheels of bureaucracy and funding grind slow even for great causes but finally in 1999 with the help of Omar Davies and the The Trench Town Development Association (TDA) work began on a new building funded by The Jamaican Social Investment Fund, The World Bank and a collection of private sponsors. Rather than the crumbling shack that went before the new "beautiful" building was concrete with glass doors and windows and

provided the conditions to be a safe and secure place of learning. At this time the centre was at its peak usage with up to fifty visiting adults and children a day.

From 2000-2005 Ellison took a five-year sabbatical from Jamaica to nurse her ailing, elderly parents. When she returned the centre had fallen into disarray. Ziggy was gone, Massive Dread and Chubby had been killed in community warfare and a lot of the centres most dedicated supporters had moved. The entire book collection had disappeared, as had the furniture and any materials that could be ripped from the structure. A barbershop and a car garage had moved onto the site, "So at least it was being used," she says. At this point many would have given up and come to the fatalist decision the community didn't want a library so why bother, but not Ellison. Within weeks she'd got community leaders onside to move the garage out – "But the barbershop stayed, it's a good example of enterprise and doesn't take up much room" – and had mobilised a new team to repair, refurnish and re-launch the centre. One of the members of this team was Keisha Howell aka Happy, a young woman who aged 10 had helped her unpack the first banana crate of books and Ellison now employs as a full time librarian and teacher. Ellison realised most of the chairs Trench Town residents use to gather on street corners or come from community centres and churches, so purchased deliberately distinctive bright yellow plastic ones so if they go walkies, "We can just say, 'Excuse me, that's our chair thank you very much', and remove it no arguments." Does this ever happen? "Sure, all the time."

Roslyn Ellison is a tough, plain talking, no nonsense broad and she's needed to be to keep the centre running and let the torrent of "undercurrents" wash over her over the years. Fully aware of the potential reprisals from both within the community and the authorities she diplomatically uses the term "undercurrents" to refer to the problems – gang divisions, wayward Don's, unscrupulous politicians, pseudo do-gooders – that have a strangle hold on the area. "I put my head down and do the work," she says. "If you get bogged down with the personal politics and the PHD (Pull Him Down) mentality, it drains your energy." Like many foreigners that come to Jamaica Ellison was intoxicated by the vibes, energy, spirit of its people and, "potential for progress". Already a teacher with a background in social libraries (during the 80s she ran a Labour Library in South Central LA) and a childhood-instilled passion for books, starting the TTRC was a mission that "made sense" and was something, "I could do." Despite the constant struggles and suspicion – "Because I'm not doing it for the money or for Jesus, people presume there must be a secret agenda" - she never regrets the immense amount of time and personal finance she has given to the project. "I don't ski," she laughs. "I do this."

Today the centre is testament to what can be achieved in even the most complicated circumstances. The struggle for space is over and the centre has two fully kitted out buildings, a veranda and garden. There's a full program of classes and activities, frequent community concerts and events such as hotly contested spelling bee's, a graduates list of kids and adults who've made startling achievements such as learning to write for the first time aged 46, and even a new NGO, FACE Jamaica (Friends Advancing Community Education) founded by Ellison and chaired by Carl Brown of nearby education and sports institute Boys Town. With things going so swimmingly (although the search for funding and new books is never ending) what's the next big challenge for the centre? "Persuading people of the benefits is an on going battle," says Ellison. "There isn't the focus on books like there once was, everyone wants to watch TV and send text messages." And what's the battle plan to tackle this? "As is the Jamaican way we're reaching people through reggae. We hold free concerts near the school

hosted by our supporters at Roots FM and I steam around telling everyone about the centre. Music unites and builds bridges, books give knowledge and with knowledge comes power and the community needs both. Music and books, it's a sweet connection.”

The TTRC constantly needs funding, books and inspiration. To find out more log on to:
www.trenchtownreadingcentre.com