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PARENTS LAY FOUNDATIONS FOR FIGHT TO THE TOP

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By Dina Medland

Baroness Scotland says her mother could have run ICI with one hand tied behind her back and that her father instilled in her a feeling that she could do anything she wanted – and that what she did mattered.

From these foundations, she built a sparkling career as a barrister and was attorney-general from 2007 until the last general election in 2010.

But with hindsight she is able to reflect on the many obstacles she had to overcome, racial and sexual discrimination among them. When she completed her law degree, she recalls: “I said I wanted to go to the bar and I was warned I had three impediments – I was female, I was black and I was not Oxbridge, which meant I had no contacts. I decided I would rather try, even if it ended in disaster.”

She turned being a tall, young, attractive, black, elegant woman into an advantage: “I had an unusual name which everyone remembered. I was very young and unexpected, and then there was the way I spoke. Also, my sister Greta is a fashion designer and showed me what to wear – and all the things that started off being a disadvantage became an advantage.”

Allied to her innate intelligence, the Patricia Janet Scotland “brand” emerged. She says: “I was given work that was way above my ‘call’. I tended to appear before High Court judges, and not to lose – and they remembered me.”

Now officially titled Patricia Scotland, Baroness of Asthal, she and her 11 siblings – she is the second youngest – were brought to the UK from the Caribbean island of Dominica by their parents in the late 1950s.

Baroness Scotland was two and a half years old when the family moved: “My mother was very strong and very well organised – we were five girls and seven boys. She ran our home with what I now realise was military precision. I believe she could have run ICI with one hand tied behind her back.”

She also remembers well her father’s early influence: he insisted that each individual has a unique capability as well as a responsibility to do their very best. “For as long as I

remember, I was made to feel that I could do anything I wanted and what I did mattered – which I realise now was a form of empowerment. We were also taught never to deprecate our own talent,” she says.

Faith played an important role in a home for which her Methodist father and Catholic mother had given up a Caribbean lifestyle that included domestic help and social status for a life in London.

“They had no idea what they were getting into, but they did it for our educational advancement. They also believed children will achieve exactly what you expect of them – so if you expect nothing, that is what you will get,” she says.

“My father thought I should be a physicist but physics and I did not get on. I was state educated at Walthamstow School For Girls and was going to study English and sociology because I wanted to be a social worker. But in those days you could not become one until you were 25, and I would have had to wait five years.

“Then I met a woman at a careers fair who was a lawyer, and she was my inspiration.”

And so Patricia Scotland, the young student, began a London University law degree instead.

Having overcome all impediments, she made a spectacular success of being a barrister and went on to claim a series of firsts – from becoming the first black woman to have been appointed Queen’s Counsel in 1991 at the age of 35, to being the first black female government minister when she made Foreign Office minister in 1999. She was the first and only woman to have been appointed attorney-general in the 700-year history of the office, serving from 2007 to 2010, and today is the first black woman to be a member of the House of Lords.

But being in the public eye has not always been pleasant: a furore around her inadvertent employment of an illegal immigrant as a cleaner in 2009 received vast media coverage, while the conviction on fraud and other charges of that cleaner a year later received little, which contributes to her aversion to publicity.

Her home is now the Oxfordshire village of Asthal and Baroness Scotland is focusing on two areas where she sees pressing need for action.

The first is domestic violence: having chaired the inter-ministerial group on domestic violence from 2003 to 2007 she oversaw a reduction of such violence by 64 per cent, resulting in a £7.5bn cut in its economic cost in England and Wales.

Last year, she founded the Global Foundation for The Elimination of Domestic Violence, following the release of World Bank data suggesting that women aged between 15 and 44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, motor accidents, war and malaria. “It has been wonderful to see what joint partnership can achieve,” she says. Her other focus is on corruption. Having returned to practice at the bar, she has set sights on tackling “another thing that destroys countries”.

“In Tunisia in 2010, a 26-year-old fruit and vegetable seller who couldn’t legitimately get

a licence to do his job protested in the only way he could find – he imploded,” she says. Mohamed Bouazizi’s refusal to pay bribes and his protest by self-immolation has been seen as the trigger for the so-called “Arab spring”.

But Baroness Scotland is concerned that people “forget what he was trying to say”. She believes it is a stark warning to all countries that fail to implement the rule of law. She aims to use her extensive experience in criminal justice reform and her considerable energy to advise on ways of making an impact that is felt worldwide: “Business is global and global business can make a powerful statement by not bowing to local blandishments and making it very clear that there must be adherence to one standard,” she says.

Secret CV

Who were your mentors?

My father and my family because whenever I felt I couldn’t do things they said ‘come off it’. Keith Evans, with whom I created a new set of chambers at Gray’s Inn Square after not being able to get in anywhere. At the bar, Richard Scott, Johan Steyn and the many other judges who supported me.

Your first big break?

Becoming a QC in 1991. At 35, I was the youngest QC since William Pitt the Younger and the first black woman to be appointed.

What else might you have done?

A ballerina in modern expression dance. When I danced I felt truly alive.

Best career advice to others

Find something to do that you love doing. If you do, it doesn’t feel like work – otherwise it is like dragging a stone weight around with you. Nobody does ‘you’ better than you.
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