

BUSINESS

Rowena Finlayson

Rowena Finlayson is a confident go-getter and risk-taker who brings excitement and enthusiasm to everything she does whether it's holding a conversation, operating a business or organizing a fundraiser for one of her favourite charities. It is this passion for living and learning that has helped her succeed at business, motherhood and charitable work. While she is not the first woman to own or operate a business in The Bahamas, she is perhaps the most diversified business woman in The Bahamas. "The only way to succeed is to be focused on what you're doing. You have to know the business and create a passion for the business because you're not going to succeed unless you really love what you're doing. Surround yourself with the best per-

Rowena has her personal favourites. She is co-chairman for the Red Cross Fair and supports the Ranfurly Home for children and the Council for the Disabled. Her concern for the disabled led her to establish the Bahamas Infant Stimulation Programme for babies born with disabilities.

The last of four children in the family of Family Island Commissioner James Rolle and homemaker Olga Rolle, Rowena was born in Andros and spent her early childhood in San Salvador and Cat Island before moving back to Andros at the age of nine. She recalls that her mother was an easy going woman who loved cooking and baking and caring for her family, while her father believed strongly in ethics and education and



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sonnel you can find and make sure everyone in the organization is working as a team focused on the same goal. I keep monitoring my progress and checking to see how I'm coming and looking at what else I need to do to go beyond."

Since 1972 she and her husband Gareth 'Tiger' Finlayson have together acquired, started and successfully developed numerous businesses offering a range of products and services, from office supplies and furniture, to laundromats, automobiles, pharmaceuticals, liquor, food and clothing. Today, the Finlaysons own and operate the Burn's House Group of Companies, which comprises Bahamas Blenders in Nassau and its subsidiaries in the Family Islands, along with Bethell Robertson Co. Ltd. They are also the owners of Bahamas In-flight Services, which supplies food to airplanes and restaurants at Nassau International Airport and are major shareholders in Commonwealth Brewery. In addition, the Finlaysons are involved in many other companies through their investments. Their companies employ a total 650 Bahamians and support numerous civic, cultural and charitable causes. Among these

encouraged his four children to develop their minds in a number of ways. He would write speeches, which they would have to memorize and deliver at community events. He also gave them a book of 100 words beginning with A and ending with Z which they had to learn the spellings and meanings of in order to receive a cash prize. Interestingly, the first word in the book was "acquisition".

Determined that her parents would not have to pay to send her to high school, Rowena worked hard and passed the examinations to attend both St. John's and the Government High School. She chose the latter school for which she was granted a scholarship. While there she was involved in many activities including softball, basketball and the choir. She also took piano lessons after school. As her father still was in Andros she often wrote letters to him. If she made mistakes in spelling or grammar he would correct her letters in red ink and send them back to her. She said this helped to improve her written English and made her more aware and critical of the correct use of the English Language. Upon graduating from the Government High School, Rowena was



accepted at Shaw University to study accounting, however, with her elder siblings having left home to pursue their own education and careers, her mother did not want her to leave home. As a result she stayed in Nassau with her mother and did the accounting course by correspondence with La Salle University.

At the age of 16 she worked in the book-keeping section of BaTelCo and did so well that her supervisor thought she deserved an increment. But, when she learned that she was considered too young to get a raise, she left BaTelCo and went to work for Kelly Motor Company. She also continued to take piano lessons and this was how she met her future husband, Gareth Finlayson, then a tailor who worked near her music teacher's premises on Market Street. After they became acquainted the young suitor often walked her home. At first she felt that he was just a friend and a great dancing partner, but he had serious intentions and told her that one day she would become his wife. As it turned out, he

was right. They got married in 1963 and as a wedding present, Rowena father's gave the couple the money he had saved by not having to pay Rowena's school fees at Government High.

Rowena continued to work and got a job with Arawak Trust Company where she became section head of the accounts department with responsibility for over 200 offshore accounts. It was a good job and Rowena performed well in this post but she was just in training to become her own boss. In 1972 and 1973 respectively, the Finlaysons acquired their first companies, Business Systems and Office Specialist Ltd. Gareth took responsibility for Business Systems and Rowena took over Office Specialists Ltd., expanding the product line from just office supplies to include office furniture and service for office machines. "At the time," Rowena says, "you didn't find women running this type of business." Although the new venture was a big challenge that required many long hours, Rowena found she enjoyed

working for herself. The experience encouraged her to explore other business opportunities.

In 1979 she opened a laundromat on Market Street which was so successful that two years later she opened her second laundromat, Rapid Wash, which was located on Wulff Road. During this period she also served as President of the Bahamas Professional Women's Association and obtained her M.B.A from the University of Miami's Nassau campus. By this time a mother of four, Rowena says she would help her children with their homework, then study through the night and go to work at 9:00 a.m. "I didn't have to do it, but I was doing it for myself. I was very determined because I feel that once you have knowledge nobody can take it away from you. Every person should be equipped with as much knowledge as possible. You should never feel you know it all because life is a learning process," she says.

Over the next two decades the Finlaysons owned and operated businesses including ABC Motors, an automobile sales and service dealership, and Cole Thompson Pharmacies. There were many successes, but Rowena says there were also failures. "I went through a period where I got very high on the power and felt I was achieving it all on my own. I got to the place where I forgot how to say thank you to God and as a result I experienced failure. I had to stop and reorganize my life and I believe I'm such a better person for it. Now I know how to give thanks to God morning and evening. I put him first and I realize that I don't do things on my own but any success I enjoy and everything I have comes from God," she says.

Today Rowena works from home and plays more of a background role in the family businesses as her children Mark, Ray and Tanya are now very involved in the operation and marketing of the various companies. However, she continues to keep track of the companies' progress by reviewing all of the financial statements.

In her leisure time Rowena enjoys traveling, yachting and fishing with her husband Gareth. A grandmother, she is an avid reader and also enjoys interior decorating.