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LOCAL : NEWS

Scarborough-raised sons say their Jamaican-Canadian mother's story should be taught in Ontario schools

'Goddie', a non-fiction novel, recreates Windrush migrant's surprising past

SCARBOROUGH The Mirror.

By Mike Adler Toronto.com
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What do you really know about your mother and her past?

As children in East York and Scarborough, Robert and Richard Picart knew their mother, Veta — known to all as Goddie — had a special suitcase nobody else could touch.

Kept inside were clues to a life her twin sons hadn't understood, including the steamship ticket, written in Italian, that took Goddie from Jamaica to the United Kingdom as part of the Windrush generation.

"In this tsunami of human migration, our mother caught a wave," Richard Picart says.

"Her history is the history of thousands of Caribbean people."

What Goddie went through for that ticket, how she escaped poverty in Jamaica to build a life for herself in England and Canada, is set down in "Goddie," the non-fiction novel Robert wrote and both Picart brothers want to see taught in Ontario secondary schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic gave added urgency to Robert's questions about Goddie's early life. As the pandemic raged, she was in a Toronto retirement home and Robert, who now lives in Atlanta, started recording their phone conversations.

"When you have someone who's in their 90s, time is of the essence. You're racing an unknown clock," Robert said beside Richard in the food court at Malvern Town Centre, where he once had a job cutting keys.

"Originally, I was just recording it for our kids and for ourselves."

As first-generation Canadians "sitting on somebody's shoulders," Richard added, both brothers felt "a legacy responsibility," a mandate to document Goddie's life, to "seal her in time."

That's the immigrant experience many in the food court, whose parents also brought them here from somewhere far away, would share, said Richard.

In Goddie's case, though, her story proved extraordinary. A middle child of nine, her parents died while she was young, and she entered into indentured servitude to pay for her education.

She escaped servitude, Robert recorded in the book he researched and wrote over 18 months, escaping to Jamaica's capital Kingston with three chickens and "the pride of a thousand queens."

Goddie had promise. Her siblings, even the eldest, looked to her, and her mother's advice had been to study and leave Jamaica if she could: "When di window opens fah yuh, fly through," she had said.

Veta Picart in the early 1960s as a nurse-training in England. | Picart family photo

A few years after the Second World War, Goddie seized a chance to go to the U.K., where she became a nurse.

"That was the window," said Robert, who travelled to Jamaica a decade ago with his mother, who showed him Spring Hill, her hometown, her childhood school, even the field where she had picked coffee beans.

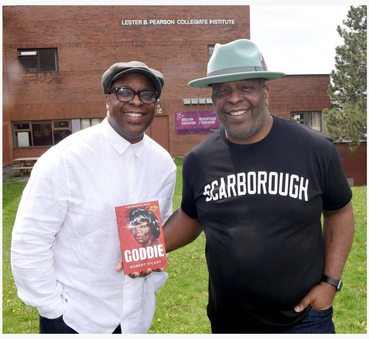
"It was a first-hand sowing of the seed," recalled Robert, who said he and Richard talked to cousins and other relatives to verify and fill in details of Goddie's past.

Her own copy has check marks Goddie added in the margins; she was proud to have her story told this way, the Picarts said.

Goddie's husband brought her to Canada but soon left Goddie on her own.

Goddie's life contained difficult moments, but she disclosed them for the biography. As much as they were private, "they were also episodes that she didn't want us to relive," said Richard, now a Pickering resident.

Her education had been at risk; she encouraged her children to take advantage of education and see the world. The life Goddie recounted shows what to do and not do, the role of faith and value of financial knowledge, said Richard.



Robert Picart, left, and his brother Richard stand in front of Lester B. Pearson Collegiate Institute, which they attended in Malvern. Author Robert Picart wrote "Goddie," a non-fiction novel that tells the story of a young woman who emigrates from Jamaica after losing her parents as part of the last century's Windrush movement. | Dan Pearce/Metroland

When people suggested the book should be in schools, the brothers leaned into the idea, building a course around Goddie that could be part of the Ontario curriculum.

Their work was favourably received by the province.

The Picarts continue to introduce the course to educators and say one North Scarborough secondary school principal has pledged to teach the course already.

"Everyone that we've talked to has said yes," Richard said.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: Reporter Mike Adler was interested in the story behind "Goddie," a non-fiction biography, and how it became eligible to be included in the Ontario curriculum.