

# The Red Dress Affair

Gina Pitts is a trailblazer! As a health care professional she stands out at many levels. She was one of the first nurse practitioners in the UK, she designed the first English National Board Practice Nurse Course for Oxford Brookes University as well as the first paramedic course in Barbados and the Caribbean.

Her biggest challenge is coping with the limited hours in one day to do all that she wants to do.

Born in England, Gina was the beneficiary of supportive Barbadian parents who encouraged her to be the best at whatever she tried to do, whether it was sports, music or academia.

Armed with this support and her 'give-it-all-you've-got-attitude' Gina set out to excel from an early age.

Growing up she was the only black girl in her school of 900 students, but she never saw herself as different or subordinate.

She was an active child. Gina started playing netball and her skill on the court led her to become a county player who was called up for the under-21 trials in England.

Off the court, she started dancing at the age of 8 and that lasted for two years. She also excelled at track and field, winning several awards for cross country running, high jump and as a member of her school's relay team.

Gina also dabbled in music. She played baritone and e' flat tenor horn in a traditional UK brass band for five years. She also holds a Grade 3 merit in music from the Royal College of Music.

Some of her favourite childhood memories include trips to Barbados with her parents, who worked hard to improve their standard of living.



"We always seemed to be moving to a bigger and better house and eventually my parents lived in a wonderful little village environment where the garden backed on to fields with sheep, cows and horses. This was all due to the efforts of my mother who had this as her goal from the time she arrived in England".

As a result of her parent's example, Gina grasped every opportunity to better herself and after graduating from Robert Gordon School of Nursing, the Royal College of Nursing and De Montford University, Gina trained at the Old Church Hospital, Romford, Essex as a registered general nurse in 1987 before working as a staff nurse in a combined medical unit of coronary care and intensive care in Milton Keynes, UK.

From there she moved on to community nursing and became a family practice nursing sister, specializing in asthma and coronary care. After qualifying as a teacher, she then became a Lecturer/Practitioner in Practice Nursing at Oxford Brookes University, in the post-graduate community Practice Nursing programme for four years.

Pitts also served as a Health Care Service Manager at Cranfield University, Beds in the UK and her role included overseeing health and safety management, for 2500 staff and students, which included a meningitis outbreak, and for the aircraft evacuation trials including the newly launched Airbus A380. She also gained recognition and a grant from the British Heart Foundation to run CPR courses for laypersons, which she did for five years.

"Nursing has been my life and I am very proud of my profession. I have been a lecturer, manager, counsellor, health and safety risk manager, I was sent to a USA think tank, and I have been honoured to be part of so many lives.

"Taking nursing to the next level is what Barbados needs. There are not many jobs which give such a wide range of fulfilment - where you can support a family through the death of their loved one, or see healing take place in a wound and know the patient is not in pain any longer, or the light go on for a student, and you know you are making a difference".

After moving to Barbados in 2002, Gina accepted her first job as a tutor at the Barbados Community College in the undergraduate nursing programme and during that time she volunteered at the Heart & Stroke Foundation, and became the ECC project co-ordinator.

Her work did not go unnoticed. She was invited to attend a 'think tank' experience at the Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee, where nurses from all over the world were invited to strategize on disaster preparedness and mitigation.

"I was the only representative from the Caribbean and I had to do a presentation. This was in light of 9/11 and the subsequent major incidents that the US had experienced. It was a wonderful experience of mostly women thinking at a very high and meaningful level".

The mother of two sons, ages 20 & 25 credits her husband for the support he gave to her over the years.

"I could not have completed most of my career

without the support of my husband. He has been there for me all the way, both spiritually and literally. Most of my day is taken up with work and I work long, unsocial hours, but there has never been a time when any distrust is present. Our kids have grown up knowing that either of their parents can cook, clean and drive them to wherever they need to be".

A woman who has steadily climbed many ladders and who as CEO of the Heart & Stroke Foundation depends heavily on volunteers, Gina has passed on the importance of volunteering to her sons.

"I have also tried to instill in my sons that to give of yourself is more valuable than money.

It can help you on the road to a new career or cement a memory in someone that may come in useful".

Despite her hectic schedule, Gina finds time to relax and she enjoys reading, gardening, cooking, playing golf and tennis. She is hoping to see more young women keeping fit and staying active.

"Keeping fit and staying active also keeps heart disease, which is the number one killer of women worldwide, at bay".

Gina is passionate about her work and as such initiated the Red Dress Campaign five



*"I have always wanted to make a difference and this present job as CEO of the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Barbados gives me the chance to do that for a nation. I am driven by the cause to promote better heart health in Barbados. With a supportive team both at work and at home it is my ambition to attain nothing less".*  
Gina Pitts