





# THE CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE IN PITTSBURGH

## An interview with Myrven Caines, M.D.

by Joe W. Trotter

**The Caribbean Vibes Steelband was the idea of Verna Crichlow, center, a native of Tobago, West Indies. Some of the other members include, from left, Tim Bierria, Jeanne Crichlow, Rudy Crichlow, and Jay Constable. Verna is also a math teacher, festival promoter, and disc jockey for "Caribbean Rhythms" on WYEP radio.**

**Editor's Note:** Dr. Caines was born in Trinidad in the West Indies. He received his secondary school education in Trinidad and attended the University College of the West Indies (formerly affiliated with the University of London) in Jamaica, where he obtained his medical degree in 1963. He moved to Pittsburgh in 1967 for postgraduate work at the University of Pittsburgh, and later completed his American medical board exams in the specialty of anatomical and clinical pathology. He is currently an Associate Professor of Pathology in the School of Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Caines is also Associate Director of Laboratories at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Pittsburgh. He is married and resides in O'Hara Township. Note: this interview was transcribed and edited with the assistance of H. LaRue Trotter.

**J**WT: IN LOOKING at the West Indian or Caribbean experience in Pittsburgh, what are some of the key issues that we should consider up front?

**MC:** I think one thing that we should point out in the preliminary remarks is that the Caribbean is not a homogeneous population. We should differentiate the English-speaking Caribbean from the French, from the Hispanic, and the Dutch. The thing that unifies them is the colonial experience historically, but that very colonial experience also makes them heterogeneous. So that each island has its own distinct flavor, its own history depending on which colonial power was the most dominant.

**JWT:** Could you provide some specific examples of how these different histories have manifested themselves in the lives of people from the Caribbean?

**MC:** A quick example would be the two islands which are at the extreme north and south poles. Jamaica, which is closer to Florida you will notice, has a more North American influence superimposed on its British colonial experience, whereas Trinidad has more of a Latin American experience superimposed on its Spanish,

English, and French experience. So I represent, then, somebody from the English speaking Caribbean. Again, many African-Americans in Pittsburgh who look like me are Hispanic or come from the French islands. In Pittsburgh, for example, we have several people from Haiti. I am not aware of anybody from the Dutch islands of Curacao or Aruba. Also let's not forget Guyana, which though it's on the South American continent is traditionally regarded as part of the Caribbean. It was formerly called British Guyana but is now Guyana. We have many Guyanese in Pittsburgh.

**JWT:** How would you characterize the current Caribbean population in the Pittsburgh region? Do you have any precise numbers?

**MC:** There are no accurate records. Based on the long time that we have lived in Pittsburgh, based on social activities that we have attended and personal acquaintances and so forth, our best estimate is that it is somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000. The other thing I think we should point out is that in the Caribbean population here, we have a permanent resident population and a large transitional student population. When I say Caribbean, I mean the Caribbean African-American population.

**JWT:** Could you describe the occupational experiences of people from the West Indies? How widely are Caribbean African-Americans represented in the region's economy?

**MC:** In the Caribbean population in Pittsburgh, we have people represented in all walks of life. We have people in medicine, law, engineering, nursing, teaching (at university and high school level), and clergy. We have people in physics and astronomy, in heavy industry, computer science, social work. We have business entrepreneurs who have bars, restaurants, music companies, and grocery stores, consulting firms that train corporations and individuals. We have technicians, working class people, and we have unemployed. So every section of the working community of Pittsburgh is represented by the Caribbean community here.

**JWT:** Tell me a little about your decision to move to Pittsburgh.

**MC:** I came to Pittsburgh in 1967 after having practiced internal medicine at the University College Hospital and industrial medicine at Reynolds Jamaica Mine Company in Jamaica.

**JWT:** So you were drawn to Pittsburgh by medical facilities?

**MC:** For postgraduate training, yes. But at the time we were drawn here, we had also made a conscious decision that we did not want to go below the Mason-Dixon Line or further west than Chicago. Because viewing the United States from outside, we were fully conscious of what the Civil Rights movement and racial problems were at that time. In 1968, King was assassinated. We came at the peak of the Civil Rights Movement.

**JWT:** Could you discuss your initial reception here in Pittsburgh by both blacks and whites, within and outside the academic community? Perhaps you could begin with some general recollections?

**MC:** Of course one of the problems of speaking generally is that you lose specificity. So I would say, generally speaking, my first impression of the city was that it was friendly. Even looking back on a scale of 1-10, I would say it was a 6 or 7. When I arrived in June of 1967, I was met at the airport by a white family that

participated in the Pittsburgh Council for International Visitors. At that time, people who participated in these programs were interested in meeting people from abroad and having them in their homes for a two-week period during which time they attempted to get to know people from a different cultural background. That was the aim of the program.

I was contacted before I got here and asked whether I would like to spend two weeks with a family and I agreed. I stayed with the family in Bethel Park and I was treated very well. As a matter of fact, at the end of the two weeks, when I did not find housing, they volunteered that I could stay in their home as long as it was necessary to find housing. They participated actively by taking me around the city to help me to look for housing accommodations. I stayed with them for almost a month. So that was a positive experience from white Americans. We did experience discrimination in housing.

**JWT:** Your introduction to the city was very favorable indeed. On the other hand, how were you received by your colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh?

**MC:** Academically, I ran straight into racism full, square, and center. And there were some white professors in the department, who point blank refused to teach me anything, who hid materials from me, and it was very clear that their intentions were that I should not succeed. I should hasten to point out however, that a few African-Americans also put certain road blocks in my way. That was quite a shock to me.

**JWT:** How did you respond to these forms of discrimination?

**MC:** My reaction to them was probably similar to what you would find from most immigrants, which is that we viewed these as road blocks which one would have to overcome. So my philosophy was to turn every negative experience into a positive experience. But the facts are that we did encounter discrimination.

**JWT:** When you say certain people black and white created road blocks, do you mean men and women?

**MC:** No. It is interesting because most of these road blocks were created by males.

**JWT:** A few moments ago, you alluded to discrimination in the housing market. Could you now elaborate upon your initial experiences within the larger community life of the city and region?

**MC:** The initial reaction when we walked into a business place, for example, was negative, until we spoke. Then, our accents betrayed our origin and the reception was better. This was something that you become conscious of very quickly. You were treated differently from indigenous African-Americans and this was the source of a lot of problems, especially on campuses among blacks from different parts of the African diaspora. For example, in *Time Magazine* about 10 or 15 years ago an article described the tensions on campuses like Howard University between blacks from different regions — Caribbean, United States, and Africa. the resentment, and one can understand why, was mostly by the indigenous African-Americans against the other blacks who they felt were treated in a more favorable way by whites in the United States.

**JWT:** Yes, that is a common perception, but I wonder if that has changed over time?

**MC:** Yes, it has changed. The relationship between the different African-American groups is better possibly due to diversity programs, increased travel, and exposure to different musical forms.

**JWT:** You initiated this interview by emphasizing the diverse origins of people from the Caribbean. Despite such internal diversity, is there a definable West Indian or Caribbean community in Pittsburgh today?

**MC:** Yes. There is a sense of community vis-a-vis geographic origins, past historical experience, the immigrant experience, and so forth. However, the Caribbean community in Pittsburgh, much like the indigenous African-American community, is dispersed throughout Allegheny County. This is in sharp contrast to other places like New York where you would find the Caribbean community concentrated in places like Brooklyn, the Bronx, Long Island and parts of Queens, or like Hartford, Connecticut, where there are specific geographic areas of predominantly Caribbean people. Having said that, we do have traditional and non-traditional ways in which the Caribbean community is united. We have churches which a large number of Caribbean people attend [e.g., the Lincoln Avenue Church of God, where Senior Pastor Rev. Leonard Roache is Jamaican]. We also have the Caribbean Association of Pittsburgh, founded in 1978, and the Caribbean and Latin American Student Association of Pittsburgh [based at the University of Pittsburgh] in which Caribbean students from both the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University get together monthly during the academic year.

**JWT:** Could you elaborate upon the types of social activities sponsored by the Caribbean community of Pittsburgh and the principal aims of such events?

**MC:** There are numerous social activities that tend to bring the Caribbean community together, for example weddings. We have several structured annual events that tend to interface with the larger community in Pittsburgh. In the spring, we participate in the Caribbean and Latin American Festival, sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Center for Latin American Studies. For the last 15 years, the Caribbean community has actively participated in this festival. We have an annual picnic in the summer. Also in the summer we participate in the Mon Yough Riverfront Entertainment and Cultural Council Caribbean Day at the Riverfront Park in McKeesport.

But the highlight of the Caribbean Association of Pittsburgh's activities is what we call a "Caribbean Night." We have done this for the last 14 years. It is the biggest event that we have each year. It takes place in the Fall, usually in November, and the aim of the program is to expose our American friends to Caribbean culture. What we do is select a country that we want to highlight. A representative from the Embassy or the United Nations of that particular country gives a speech that would emphasize the economy, the history, and the politics. We have dinner of the typical foods and afterwards we have ethnic entertainment with dancers and music that's typical for that region. When we use the

word Caribbean in the context of the "Caribbean Night," we include the countries of the Caribbean basin that are touched by the Caribbean Sea, so that includes the countries that are on the northern coast of South America, for example, Venezuela. In that sense we do bridge the English- and Spanish-speaking countries.

**JWT:** You mentioned that several of your events tend to interface with the larger Pittsburgh community. Do you care to elaborate upon what you mean by this?

**MC:** One of the things that the Caribbean community tries to do in Pittsburgh through its social activities is not to limit the experience to the Caribbean community. We invite the American community to participate in our events because we feel that through that kind of interaction and participation that the larger community would get to understand something about our Caribbean culture. So we emphasize the cultural and educational aspects in our clubs.

**JWT:** In recent years, scholars, journalists, and popular media have emphasized growing class divisions within the African-American community. Are such tensions apparent within the Caribbean community of Pittsburgh?

**MC:** I think in my preliminary remarks I alluded to the diversity in the occupations of the Caribbean people and I think from that, one would have to infer that there is a class distribution among the Caribbean community. That is a somewhat loaded term to introduce because it incites different reactions among different groups within the Caribbean community. For example, in some of our social clubs and groups we find that people in the working class community sometimes are made to feel uncomfortable by a high concentration of professionals within the same club or group. I don't think that this is an experience that is limited to the Caribbean community. My feeling is that this happens with all social groups. But I think that it is fair to point out that it is perhaps a handicap that tends to prevent the group from being as cohesive as it could be.

**JWT:** Are Caribbean people involved in labor unions in the Pittsburgh region?

**MC:** We do have a few people who were able to get into the unions during the days of Operation Dig. This goes back to the Nate Smith era in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the labor movement struggle here in Pittsburgh, involving the building trades and so forth. That participation is limited.

**JWT:** To what extent do you see the Caribbean community emphasizing its African heritage as a key component in defining its identity in the Pittsburgh region?

**MC:** Interestingly, your question goes back to the 1930s and somewhere around the Harlem Renaissance period in this country, in which other Caribbean people played very vital roles, Marcus Garvey and others. At that time there was an attempt to identify and link African-Americans very strongly with people on the African continent. And it didn't work, because my suspicion is that there were enough differences between the two communities. I sense that African-Americans felt that they were Americans first and not Africans and tried to identify and solve their problems within the American continent. They did not see going back

to Liberia and Sierra Leone and these places as the solution to the African-American problem, even though some people did go back.

**JWT:** You are drawing a very interesting parallel between today's African-American community and the era of the Great Migration, but do you believe that African-Americans, particularly of Caribbean origins, have changed their perspective on Africa since then?

**MC:** I don't believe that African-Americans of Caribbean origin in Pittsburgh are looking to a larger international African community to identify with or solve their problems. Caribbean people are comfortable with their identity. They are not looking for an identity beyond their Caribbeanness. As a matter of fact, the Caribbean people are aware and proud of their African heritage, but they are equally aware of all the other things that have contributed to their identity. In fact, Caribbean people don't talk about a Caribbean "identity" they talk about "identities" because they are aware of the Spanish, the French, and the English influence on their Africanness that produced the Caribbean identity.

The Caribbean identity is the amalgam of all these different identities. So we are not looking to anybody or to any other place for a larger identity. Because of these identities, the Caribbean community in Pittsburgh or any other area of the country tend to be very nationalistic about what their original country was in the Caribbean. For example, in large Caribbean communities in the U.S., you will find some polarization between people, especially from the larger islands. For example, in New York, Connecticut, and Pittsburgh to a lesser extent, you will find some polarization of Jamaicans versus, say, people from Trinidad or the other islands. This is contributed in large part to the fact that Jamaica is the largest island in the Caribbean. In most Caribbean communities in the U. S. you will find that the highest percentage of Caribbean people are Jamaicans.

**JWT:** What do you see happening in the Caribbean community as we approach the 21st century?

**MC:** I think the same things that are going to affect us and that

will shape the future are going to affect the entire country, actually. My own view is that in the next five years, and that will take us into the 21st century, I think we are in for some very tough economic times. That will affect the Caribbean community across the board in exactly the same way that it affects of the rest of the community. However, we think that the new immigration laws, which the new Congress is pushing with regard to immigrants, will affect the Caribbean community in the same way that it is going to affect Hispanics in the Southwest. A tightening of the resources, financial as well as human, will affect the Caribbean community in all industries that are currently "down-sizing." So that in short, I think there will be higher unemployment, especially among the working class section of the community. There is one sad note. Unfortunately, we have seen an increased drug involvement that is affecting all communities, including the Caribbean community. And this involvement extends to the Caribbean community not only in Pittsburgh but in the Caribbean itself. Those of us who have visited the Caribbean in the recent past have noted that much like the U.S. there is an increased drug involvement.

**JWT:** What do you believe should be done to address the issues that you have raised, which really cut across class, ethnic, nationality, and racial lines?

**MC:** I think that all of us have to come together more closely to understand what's going on in the community at large that affects us economically, politically, and every other adverb that you care to use. And I think that we have to unite and to educate ourselves as to what the alternatives are. We can do this through church groups, through clubs, and so on. In other words, we do not see that these various activities should be simply for entertainment purposes, having a good time, eating, drinking, and dancing. But I think we can set aside specific programs to educate our people about economic, labor, and political facts so that we can prepare ourselves for the challenges ahead. ☀