

# Nelson Mandela Day

THE EQUAL Opportunity Commission (EOC) joins United Nations members in celebrating Nelson Mandela International Day (or Mandela Day). Each year on July 18, the birthday of Mandela, the world unites to reflect on the life and legacy of this global advocate for equality, justice, dignity and human rights.

Chairman of the EOC, Ian Roach, was a lawyer for the African National Congress and Republic of South Africa government before being appointed an honorary counsel during the presidency of Mandela. He shared this of the legend:

"We are fortunate to have lived in the time of Mandela and to see and experience history as it unfolded. He is one of the most influential people in history, but he was an exceptionally humble man. I remember very clearly being told by one of his ministers that when cabinet met for the first time, there were many icons in the fight against apartheid present. He told his minis-



ters to leave their egos outside, for they have come to do the work of the people.

"I also recall the moment members of the press complimented him on his intelligence, and Mandela replied that he was just a voice of a collective wisdom; a conduit for the great people around him. He was truly an extraordinary and profound man."

Today is an opportunity for us all to renew the values that inspired and were embodied by this social justice legend. Values such as persistent determination, a deep commitment to justice; human rights, fundamental freedoms and a profound belief in the equality and dignity of every man and woman. There is a wise statement that warns us against having new experiences without having autopsies on old

ones.

Likewise, in remembrance of Mandela's fight against apartheid and his esteemed values, we should all inwardly conduct autopsies on ourselves to honestly identify our prejudices. Consequently, this mindfulness should convince us to make a personal resolution to better our human view and abandon our prejudices. Additionally, we should be vocal against the very appearance of injustice when we see it and encourage others to do the same.

It is historically documented that as a great liberation leader, Mandela fought against apartheid relentlessly, a system of white supremacy in South Africa. Under apartheid, South Africans were placed into one of four racial categories: "white/European,"

"black," "coloured," or "Indian/Asian." Non-white South Africans were second-class citizens with little or no political power. Restrictive laws governed every aspect of people's lives, dictating where they could live, work and travel, as well as restricting their access to education, health-care and other social services.

During these years of turbulence, Mandela showed the world the power of resisting oppression, of justice over inequality, of dignity over humiliation, and of forgiveness over hatred.

To a large extent, the mandate of the EOC reflects Mandela's principles/life lessons through its vision to create a society free from discrimination and prejudice, where human rights and diversity are respected and where there is equality of opportunity for all.

The Equal Opportunity Act presently seeks to protect people against discrimination as it relates to the following four categories: employment, ed-

ucation, the provision of goods and services and the provision of accommodation. Under the act, people are entitled to equality and fair treatment, despite their status. The seven status grounds covered by the act are race, ethnicity, religion, marital status, origin including geographical origin, disability and sex.

Beyond this, the commission promotes equality through its partnerships, public education initiatives, drafting of legislation and remaining agile to respond to society as it evolves.

A person who believes they have been subjected to discrimination in any of the above areas may lodge a complaint with the EOC by visiting our website: [www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt).

The EOC investigates every complaint lodged at its office. Services at the EOC are free of charge up until the stage of conciliation. Bear in mind that the EOC is not a court of law that makes determinations or gives interpretations under the act.