

Michele Rollins featured in Business Ledger Monday, July 18, 2005

Island dream
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Michele Rollins fondly remembers the first time she saw Jamaica. It was 1976, and the former Miss USA-turned-attorney was dating business tycoon John W. Rollins Sr., Delaware's former lieutenant governor.

Michele Rollins was in her early 30s, and "Big John" was 30 years her senior. Nevertheless, the pair was chaperoned by her parents. "He was the perfect Southern gentleman," she says of Rollins, a Georgia native.

She fell in love with Jamaica's white sand, emerald peaks and Rose Hall, the Montego Bay property that John Rollins rescued from ruins. "I thought it was absolutely marvelous," she recalls.

Her passion for Jamaica was one of many things she shared with her husband, whom she married in 1977. John Rollins felt so strongly about Jamaica that he spent \$2.5 million renovating the Rose Hall Great House. He built two hotels at a time when tourism was a new island industry.

But, critics might say, love is blind. In the 1970s, when interest rates were skyrocketing, most investors wouldn't touch the politically volatile island. John Rollins, however, was investing hundreds of millions of dollars-and losing it. His conviction didn't waver.

Today Michele Rollins, chair of Rollins Jamaica Ltd., the holding company for Rose Hall Development Ltd., is seeing the couple's forbearance bear fruit. Jamaica's 2004 tourist arrivals increased 4.8 percent over 2003 and 11.7 percent over 2002.

The Ritz-Carlton Golf & Spa Resort, Rose Hall, which opened a few months after John Rollins' death in April 2000, is an AAA Five Diamond hotel. The 427-room resort will be joined by The Palmyra Resort & Spa at Rose Hall, Jamaica's first luxury beachfront condo hotel, and a \$9.7-million shopping and entertainment venue.

Like her late husband, Michele Rollins remains passionate about Jamaica, spending about half the year there. And the love affair shows no sign of waning. "This is a huge opportunity for world-class tourism," says Rollins, who's become a business powerhouse in her own right. "You can feel the excitement."

Michele Metrinko Rollins grew up in New York City. Her father was the first Ukrainian-American on the New York Stock Exchange and her mother was an interior designer. While studying foreign service at Georgetown University in 1963, Rollins entered the New York finals for the Miss USA pageant. "It was a means for tuition and traveling," she says.

In the book "Hanging the Moon: The Rollins Rise to Riches," by Wilmington resident Drury Pifer, Rollins recounts her experience. "There were 125 of us. The air-conditioning was freezing. Finally mother (not known for mincing words) said, 'Just lose! And let's get out of here. Your dad has to get up in the morning.'"

Rollins won Miss New York City and went on to the Miss USA pageant. She recalls walking on stage in a one-piece ("Thank God") bathing suit. "Whether you have confidence or not, you have to exude it," she says. "Looks are subjective. Who knows if you will win?"

But win she did. She accompanied Bob Hope on his Christmas tour to entertain troops in the Mediterranean. She also spent a week London during the Miss World pageant. "It was wonderful."

The Miss USA title opened doors for Rollins, who graduated from Georgetown University in 1965. Yet she had to prove that she had brains under the beauty pageant crown. She received her juris doctor degree in 1968 and her master of laws in taxation in 1970.

She's been a staff attorney at the Securities and Exchange Commission, and she's done trial tax work at the Department of Justice. When she met John Rollins in 1976, she was the first female associate solicitor for Conservation and Wildlife at the Department of Interior.

Her star was on the rise. Meanwhile, critics said John Rollins' star was waning.

John Rollins, raised in a three-room house in rural Georgia, was educated in a one-room school. After World War II, Rollins and his first wife, Kitty, moved to Lewes, where he opened a Ford franchise. "Within a few months, he began buying up auto agencies in Maryland and Virginia..." Pifer writes. In 1947, Rollin's brother, Wayne, joined him in business.

Rollins thought nothing of working from 5 a.m. until 10 p.m. He also thought nothing of taking risks. He pioneered the concept of leasing trucks and automobiles. In the 1950s, when television threatened radio, Rollins and his brother bought radio stations and launched an African-American format. A billboard company followed.

"John was somebody who saw the big picture," Pifer says today. "He had an intuitive grasp of reality. He came on like a country boy, but he was a wise man."

In 1964, the brothers raised \$60 million to lead a leveraged buyout of Orkin, the Atlanta-based pest-control company, an event that made business history. None of their own capital went into the project.

Rollins didn't limit his ambitions to business. In 1952, he ran for lieutenant governor and won. In 1960, he ran for governor. This time, however, he lost. He went to Jamaica to regroup.

Rollins was enchanted by the property known as Rose Hall. Bewitched might be a better word. In the 19th century, the plantation was owned by Annie Palmer, the infamous White Witch of Rose Hall. Palmer tortured her slaves and reportedly murdered her three husbands. Palmer met her death at the hands of an angry slave.

In 1960, Rollins bought the ruined property from members of the Seagram's liquor family. Pifer writes that Rollins later said, "I invested from my heart instead of my head."

The Holiday Inn, which opened in 1970, was financed by a \$6.25 million loan from the Bank of Nova Scotia and leased to a subsidiary of Holiday Inn for a 20-year term, Pifer writes. In 1973, Rollins built the Intercontinental, later named the Wyndham. Eurodollars from Chase Manhattan fueled the development.

In 1976, Rollins' lively companion on the island was younger than the oldest of his six children. Gossipers may have called Michele Rollins a gold-digger. But there was no gold. Personal and financial problems were squeezing the life from the Rollins companies.

Rollins was recently divorced. His second wife, Linda, married William Prickett, the lawyer who'd attacked Rollins' effort to bring cable television to Delaware, Pifer writes. (Rollins eventually succeeded in starting the cable television operation.)

The Jamaican hotels had few occupants, and in the 1970s, interest rates were climbing from 5 to 18 percent. It was the "worst possible time to hold mortgages in the millions at variable interest rates," according to Pifer. New York bankers tried to sell the Jamaica property.

"He was at the worst point of his financial fortune when they met," Pifer now says. "Everybody thought he was finished. It wasn't the case of a young lady taking advantage of an older man."

Pifer, who extensively interviewed the couple for his book, says the attraction between John and Michele was intrinsic. Energy met energy. "She hit all the bases for him," he says. "She was the total woman-very hard-charging."

Already a successful lawyer, she had a savvy business sense that complemented his big picture attitude. "She tackles a project with energy and a focus that I marvel at," says Gary Wirt, vice president of Goldey-Beacom College, where Rollins serves on the board. "Her mind is analytical. She always asks the tough questions that make you think. She cuts right to the heart of the matter."

With the help of accountant Henry Tippie, Rollins International trimmed its operation to the bare bones. "They were among the first corporate managers to 'downsize' a company in the modern manner," Pifer writes. The Holiday Inn and the Wyndham were sold in the 1970s.

Yet John Rollins would not let Jamaica slip through his grasp, and his new wife helped him hold onto it. While raising their four children, she began overseeing the Rose Hall project. She told Pifer in "Hanging the Moon" that "John couldn't afford to have a \$100,000-a-year manager running that property. So I began to fly down there every Tuesday. Pregnant as I was, I would take one child and leave one at home. Thank God for my mother."

She supervised a home development project, road building, water and electric projects-all the infrastructure necessary to support development. She also championed the construction of the Ritz-Carlton and the White Witch Golf Course.

Bringing the hotel to Jamaica was challenging, even though Ritz-Carlton co-founder Bill Johnson was a family friend. A survey of Ritz-Carlton customers found that 98 percent weren't interested in traveling to Jamaica. Two years later, the question was rephrased to ask patrons if they'd consider visiting a Ritz-Carlton in Jamaica. Nearly 100 percent said "yes."

The hotel opened on Aug. 24, 2000-John Rollins' birthday. "It brought another category of tourism to Jamaica," says Jamaican Sen. Noel Sloley. "It sends a strong signal to the world that Jamaica is ready for foreign investment."

The Ritz-Carlton sparked a growth spurt, says Sloley, who owns a ground tourism business that's doubled in the last five years. "It all started with that Ritz-Carlton," he maintains. "There's been an additional 8,000 guestrooms added on the island."

Rose Hall Development is taking it to the next level. The organization is in partnerships of varying degrees with multiple projects. Consider The Palmyra Resort & Spa, located on 16 acres next to the Ritz-Carlton. The posh project, developed by Robert T. Trotta, will include villas, condos, penthouses and a 20,000-square-foot spa.

The 70,000-square-foot Shoppes at Rose Hall, situated between the Ritz-Carlton and the Wyndham, will feature European boutiques, restaurants and a "first-class grocery store," Rollins says. The activity has attracted the interest of Grupo Iberostar, the Spanish hotel giant, which is building an all-inclusive oceanfront hotel at Rose Hall, its first in Jamaica.

Rollins isn't worried about Rose Hall becoming crowded. "We wouldn't build it, if we were jamming it in," she says. "We're building critical mass and putting in services for the critical mass. There's room for everybody. We've made it a destination."

She and her husband also made Rose Hall a community, says Sen. Sloley. The couple helped rebuild a village. "They rebuilt the church, the school and rehabbed the police headquarters," he says. "They worked with people to do farming to sell products to hotels. They set up nurseries for landscaping for future developments. These are proud moments in their lives."

Today, Rose Hall Development contributes to four major Jamaican schools, including the SOS Children's Village, created in 1970 on land that John Rollins donated. In April, the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans announced the Rose Hall/SOS Children's Village/Horatio Alger Scholarship for village students. The association, which honors individuals who overcome adversity, was once chaired by John Rollins, who received the honor in 1963. Michele Rollins is a lifetime partner of the association.

She remains on the board of several Delaware organizations. When Goldey-Beacom sought funds from Coca-Cola for a new building, Rollins insisted on accompanying administrators to Atlanta, Wirt says. "She's masterful at presenting a case."

The Rollins empire, which once included truck leasing, hazardous waste treatment and broadcasting, now primarily focuses on development in Jamaica and Dover Downs. (John Rollins also owned Brandywine Raceway, which closed in 1995 after losing between \$2 million and \$3 million a year, Pifer writes.) Dover Downs got a boost from NASCAR racing and slots. The hotel's upscale restaurant is named Michele's.

Running entertainment and tourist operations has its risks. Gaming in Pennsylvania and Maryland could threaten Delaware operations. Caribbean weather is a formidable foe in Jamaica. Torrential rains in April forced the temporary closing of the Ritz-Carlton for cleanup. It should reopen this month.

Rollins says there are no plans to sell the Ritz-Carlton. Clearly, she's dedicated to her husband's legacy. Yet at the same time, she's building one of her own.