



Renaming the Bermuda Youth Library as the Florenz Webbe Maxwell Youth Library

Presented by:

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Ministry for the Cabinet Office and Digital Innovation

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Mr. Speaker,

I rise today with immense pride to announce that come July 21st, the Bermuda Youth Library will be renamed the **Florenz Webbe Maxwell Youth Library**. There is no one more fitting to lend their name to this place where our children discover the joy of reading. This renaming is a tribute to **Mrs. Florenz Webbe Maxwell** – a woman whose courage, service, and devotion to Bermuda's youth have helped shape our island for the better.

Mr. Speaker,

This idea to honour Mrs. Maxwell started with a grassroots suggestion. A respected former educator, Ms. Shirley Pearman, was the first to propose it, writing to me with the thought. Our Director of Libraries and Archives, Ms. Joanne Brangman, immediately backed the idea. When I approached Mrs. Maxwell for her blessing, she was humble and deeply moved. She expressed surprise and gratitude, mentioning how much the Youth Library has always meant to her. Her emotional response confirmed that we should honour her in this way during her

lifetime. We are not simply renaming a building; we are celebrating a beloved community icon and showing her what she means to us.

Mr. Speaker,

Many in Bermuda are familiar with Mrs. Florenz Webbe Maxwell's remarkable story. She is a retired librarian, an award-winning author, and a true hero of our island. At a very young age, she was part of a group of 18 young people known as The Progressive Group, which organised the 1959 Theatre Boycott – a peaceful protest that led to the end of segregation in our movie theatres. That watershed moment sparked the dismantling of racial segregation in other areas of Bermudian life, from hotels and restaurants to schools. Mrs. Maxwell's courage in 1959 demonstrated that one young person, armed with conviction and determination, can transform an entire community.

Mr. Speaker,

After fighting for racial equality, Mrs. Maxwell devoted the rest of her career to empowering young people through knowledge. In 1969 she joined the Bermuda Library Service at a time when it was almost impossible for a Black Bermudian woman to become a librarian – our libraries were still segregated then. She started in the most junior position, working as a messenger and book assistant just to get her foot in the door. Through perseverance and a love of learning, she earned her qualifications and, in 1974, became the Head of the Youth Library.

Mr. Speaker,

Mrs. Maxwell devoted nearly thirty years to transforming the Youth Library into a magical space for children. She brought stories to life with regular storytelling hours and special bedtime reading nights where children arrived in their pyjamas for stories, cookies, and milk. She made the library fun and engaging with reading contests, puppet shows, and even a Dial-a-Story telephone line that children could call on weekends to hear a story read aloud. She nurtured young writers through creative writing workshops, proudly displaying children's own stories alongside published books. She also made the library a centre of cultural pride, with Al Seymour Jr teaching children to make Bermuda kites every Easter and sharing our island's traditions. Long before the phrase "youth empowerment" became common, Mrs. Maxwell was empowering our youth, making every child

who entered those doors feel seen, inspired, and valued. Under her guidance, the Youth Library was more than a library; it became a lively community hub for learning, creativity, and Bermudian culture.

Mr. Speaker,

Mrs. Maxwell's passion for storytelling did not end when she retired from the library in the late 1990s. Retirement marked the beginning of a new chapter dedicated to our heritage. In 2008, she published *The Spirit Baby and Other Bermudian Folktales*, preserving local legends that might otherwise have been lost to time. Then, in 2017, she realised a lifelong dream by publishing her first novel, *Girlcott*. Drawing on her own experiences during the Theatre Boycott, *Girlcott* follows a teenage Bermudian girl coming of age amid segregation and social change. This powerful story captivated readers both in Bermuda and abroad. *Girlcott* secured second place in the 2016 Burt Award for Caribbean Literature, and it was highlighted in Oprah Winfrey's O Magazine as a must-read, raising Bermuda's story on the world stage. Just last year, *Girlcott* was chosen for a "One Island, One Book" reading initiative at The Berkeley Institute, uniting students and the community in learning from our shared history. Ms Maxwell thanks Ms Ingrid Applewhaite, Instructional Team Leader of English at the Berkeley Institute, with her committee Cheryl Ann Griffin, Steve Smith, and Sharon Dublin, made this literary initiative a resounding success. Through her writing, Mrs. Maxwell has inspired new generations to engage with Bermuda's past and carry its lessons forward.

Mr. Speaker,

What is truly extraordinary is that, through all these accomplishments, Mrs. Maxwell has remained, first and foremost, a mentor and role model for Bermuda's youth. As a Black woman who grew up in a segregated Bermuda, she had to fight for every opportunity. Because she fought, Bermuda is a fairer place today. Because she persevered, countless children in Bermuda had a librarian who looked like them, believed in them, and helped them believe in themselves. She once said that "***...discovering your gift and pursuing it is the key to fulfilment...***," and she lived those words. Mrs. Maxwell discovered her gift for education and storytelling, and she pursued it with passion. In doing so, she became a guardian of our culture – a tradition-bearer who passed on the light of

knowledge and heritage to the next generation. Even now, well into her 80s, Mrs. Maxwell continues to be an inspiration. She still shares Bermudian folktales at events, encourages young writers, and shows us all that the spirit of service and storytelling can shine throughout a lifetime.

Mr. Speaker,

By naming the Youth Library after **Florenz Webbe Maxwell**, we ensure her legacy endures at the very heart of our community. Every child who enters that library will see her name and become curious to learn about her. They will discover a woman who courageously stood up against injustice and then dedicated her life to opening doors of knowledge for all children. They will see that one person's bravery and kindness can truly transform their world. This is the lesson we are immortalising – that the actions of a single individual can inspire and uplift many others across generations.

Mr. Speaker,

Later this month, on 21 July, we will hold a small ceremony to unveil the **Florenz Webbe Maxwell Youth Library** officially. Mrs. Maxwell, her family, and her close colleagues will gather to celebrate this moment. Although the event itself will be intimate, this tribute is one that all of Bermuda shares. I invite everyone in our community to take part in honouring Mrs. Maxwell's legacy. Visit the Youth Library in the coming weeks and feel the significance of this change. Tell your children or grandchildren about Mrs. Maxwell – about how her courage and dedication made a difference in Bermuda. If you have a personal memory of her – perhaps she sparked your love of reading or taught you a lesson you never forgot – please share that story with others. Let us flood our island with gratitude for Mrs. Maxwell. Write her a note, post a message of thanks online, or pick up one of her books and read it with your family. Together, let's show Mrs. Maxwell how deeply she is appreciated and ensure that her story continues to be known and cherished.

Mr. Speaker,

In closing, on behalf of the Government and the people of Bermuda, I want to offer **Mrs. Florenz Webbe Maxwell** our heartfelt thanks. Thank you, Mrs. Maxwell, for your bravery in 1959, for standing up so that all of us could stand

together as equals. Thank you for your decades of service as a librarian, for instilling in thousands of children a love of reading and a pride in our culture. Thank you for showing us that storytelling is a powerful form of service that can nurture a community's soul. Above all, thank you for demonstrating the profound difference one person can make. The **Florenz Webbe Maxwell Youth Library** will forever remind us of your light and your legacy. May we all be inspired by your example to support our young people, to champion what is right, and to share our stories. Mrs. Maxwell, we honour you, we celebrate you, and we wish you continued joy as you see the fruits of your labour flourish.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker**.