Leona Brady Watson poses in St. Croix’s rain forest, one of her favorite places on the island.

‘Never turn your back on your heritage’

By CHRISTINE LETT
Daily News Staff

Leona Brady Watson isn’t one to talk about black history. She simply lives it — 365 days a year.

There is one thing, however, she would like to talk about.

“Never turn your back on your heritage,” Watson said. “Never forget your sources.”

In talking, Watson shared some insights on her early years on St. Croix and on Virgin Islands customs and values.

“You had to have a trade,” Watson said. “I don’t care if you’re going to milk the cows, you had to have a trade and you had to be proud of it. Mine was washing dishes. You started in the first grade.”

“Extra-curricular activities? She had plenty.

“I had to go in the field and get the thyme, the sorrel and the parsley from my grandfather’s field,” Watson said. “I had to wash everything. Then I went to get the fish. I was a messenger. I would put a ‘cara’ on my head and they would give me everything in a little tray or basket. I couldn’t stop anywhere because I couldn’t take it down unless I got help.”

The biggest and the best bunch went to the nuns, she said. The nuns played a very important part in the community. They were like second mothers, said Watson, who attended St. Patrick’s School in Frederiksted.

“I used to look for the biggest and the prettiest mango I had in my little basket to bring for the nuns. When I got there, I got a big clip of candy and a hot cup of tea. We would take everything to the nuns. When there was jack, somebody in town would take the jack fish, clean them, lime them, and take it to Mother Irwin. Everyone called them mother because they were like our mothers. But they were strict, very strict and in being strict they were parents.”

The biggest influence in her life, however, was Thomas O’Neal, her grandfather.

“My mother took off and went to states — she had to go. She was in town working for $3 a month. If she went to America, she would make $35 a month.”

Watson eventually joined her mother in New York and lived there for 37 years, but what her grandfather taught her remained embedded.

“He was a craftsman and many members of his family were craftsmen. He filled the soil. He made sure we ate from land and that we shared. The people in the town would give the country relatives stuff, and the country folk would bring maybe a tain, yarn, potato, a pumpkin.”

Although living off the land isn’t the norm for many Virgin Islanders today, Watson said she continues to plant.

“It has changed quite a bit, but not where I am. I still plant passion fruit, carombola (Chinese star fruit), thyme, parsley, breadnut ... so I don’t have to purchase these things.”

“If they had a name for it back then, my grandfather would have been a herbalist. He knew every herb to cure your illness. “My grandfather ruled with his eyes and his word was law. I would ask my grandmother questions and she would say go ask your grand father. It’s not that she didn’t know but that he was the head of the household. If he felt it was worthy of me knowing, he would tell me sit down, and I’d be sitting for hours. But times are changing.

Watson is concerned about the youth. V.I. culture is slipping away and more and more youth are becoming desensitized to its importance.

“Here everybody wants fund-raising, and children have good grades but they can’t read,” she said. “The children don’t walk the hills to find out about the trees and the birds. They don’t take them on excursions. Why are children being taught that dialect is bad English?”

“Let them learn from the elders. Take them to the country. Tell one of the elders, ‘Come journey down Creque Dam Road, teach me.’ They will want nothing more pleasing to their heart. They’ll start asking you what’s your name, what’s your father’s name. They’ll carry you back to see if there’s a connection.”

“If you don’t know where you coming from, then you don’t where you’re going. Seek knowledge. It’s not about color. It’s about what people are trying to make you think you are.”

Watson said she feels that simple pleasures have also become a thing of the past.

“My grandfather would take us to tea meetings. It’s not about serving tea. One person would tell a story and the next would challenge him. As years went by I learned that they were teaching us scriptures. It was held under a coconut tree. Now it’s money for this and money for that.”

She also remembered sitting in her grandfather’s cart, watching men in linen suits do the jiga as they held their partners out and turned them around, keeping one hand behind their back.

“Our cultural dance is so graceful,” she said. “Wukking up dehumanizes black people.”

Watson believes that good parenting is the main ingredient of productive youth, but said that the whole community must play a part.

“No matter where you were, you had a parent,” Watson said. “Everybody was mama. That’s how they lived in the village.”

Watson said that parents should teach the youth to be responsible and teach them the importance having their own standards.

Parents also should not be afraid to discipline their children. Never take what children tell you for granted, she said.

“All they want is someone to care. Teach them to take pride in themselves and in their heritage. You have to be culturally motivated.”

Christine Lett is a Daily News staff writer on St. Croix.