

Mariola Summerfield MBE: 'A Woman's Place' and her Faith.

Mariola Summerfield MBE, a well respected and prominent figure of Gibraltar's society, recently published and launched her book entitled 'A Woman's Place', which details her life as a woman in Gibraltar around the time of the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War. The book also reminisces on how a woman's place has changed dramatically since then with the help of a handful of women who were determined to improve their place in society, the effects of which are still enjoyed by today's women in Gibraltar. Upon This Rock was privileged to be able to talk to Mariola and find out why she finally decided to write the book, despite having been instigated to do so many times before, and how her faith has played an enormous part in her life.

Mariola Summerfield had been considering writing the book many years ago but always thought it was a bit too personal for publication and therefore was a little reluctant, despite being instigated by several individuals, including Father Caruana. She had always declined but the book had never left her thoughts.

It wasn't until a few years later that the idea resurfaced, this time with a lot more force! Mariola had been helping students with their dissertations and one particular student had caused quite a stir within her. "He really put me to shame. That twenty-something year old wrote a detailed paper on Gibraltar's heritage which, frankly, put me to shame." Mariola, unnerved by the experience, while flicking through some records from the Gibraltar Women's Association, was disappointed and ashamed to see the state of some of them. Much of the information was lost and more was disfigured and tattered. Furthermore, Mariola was disappointed to discover that many of today's youth know very little about the heritage of their grandparents and how it plays a major part in what is often taken for granted in Gibraltar. "The women of today owe a lot to those of yesterday and it is unfortunate to see that that isn't recognised for the most part," she lamented.

All these factors encouraged Mariola to keep the history of women in Gibraltar alive and so she began to write. Initially, she put pen to paper, dabbling with a computer every now and then but finding that it wouldn't sink in. After receiving a laptop from her daughter, she made the transition from writing to typing and found it to be much more efficient. After the book was completed, "I felt a huge sense of satisfaction and achievement," she said.

The book itself is packed full of interesting details regarding a woman's role during the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War and the changes that took place after the evacuees returned to the Rock from a woman's point of view. Mariola begins by introducing herself and the conditions at the time and tells of how herself, her two brothers and her mother evacuated to the UK, the trials and tribulations they faced and the changed perspectives of many young women as they returned to Gibraltar and the chauvinistic way of life.

"Things were very different back then," she said. "A woman's place was in the kitchen and as an instrument for child-bearing. It wasn't meant as disrespectful, it was just the way things were at the time."

Upon her return to Gibraltar, Mariola remembers how her attitude changed and she resented the fact that the men were the same as ever. She rebelled against the chauvinistic ideals, restrictions and the constant spying on her whenever she went out. “I couldn’t stand it!” she reminisced.

Many women realised that they wanted something different. They wanted to become more active within the community and respected as individuals. And so, on the 15th of February, 1966, the Gibraltar Housewives Association, now known as the Gibraltar Women’s Association, was formed by Mariola Summerfield and Angela Smith.

Mariola’s faith has played a major part in her life. She remembers being 3 years old and faith being inherent in her. “I had a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall at the end of my bed and I used to talk to it. I would also pray to God to let me be good,” she said, remembering her strict upbringing. “God has been at the centre of my life ever since then.”

Even through difficult times, Mariola has always kept her faith. “I’ve been through many bad times in my life,” she said, “but I’ve never turned my back on God. When faced with difficult times, my faith increased.”

When her husband died, Mariola found herself questioning God. “I asked Him, why now? If you don’t have an answer for me, please give me strength,” she said. She felt insolent for having questioned God, but did not turn her back on Him.

When she married, her husband was a Roman Catholic and she decided to marry him in an Anglican church, contradicting her own religion. This created an uproar of protest and many found themselves unable to attend for fear of recrimination. “I remember thinking at the time that love is more powerful than sin and that maybe one day there would be changes. I hoped that God would see it that way,” said Mariola. Shortly after that, things did change and Mariola was no longer regarded as a sinner.

Mariola feels she has been blessed with happiness and strength and for that she is grateful to God. “With my faith I feel rich beyond that of monetary or material value. I often wonder if others feel the same,” she said.

On the 5th of December, 2007, ‘A Woman’s Place’ by Mariola Summerfield, was officially launched by the Chief Minister, Peter Caruana at the John Mackintosh Hall. Many familiar faces were in attendance, including a number of government officials and representatives of the Church.

“This is a great achievement,” said Chief Minister Peter Caruana, “not only for Mariola herself, but also for the heritage of Gibraltar, the effects of which are very prominent in today’s society.”

When asked how she felt, Mariola said, “I’m just glad I could contribute to keeping some of the heritage of Gibraltar alive. I feel satisfied.”

Mariola also had some words of wisdom to offer. “People must respect others’ beliefs and values. The world is in a state because that doesn’t happen.” She encourages today’s young women to “insist on the equality and freedom of choice that their

foremothers worked so hard to achieve. Fight for it whenever they feel it is threatened.”

Mariola hopes that women today recognise the great opportunities that are available to them that weren’t available for her. She also realises that some women are still living in the traditional way and urges them to avoid criticising those who choose to take advantage of today’s advancements and opportunities.

Upon This Rock recommends ‘A Woman’s Place’ by Mariola Summerfield as a great read into the ways that a woman’s place in society has changed over the years in Gibraltar and the many obstacles that had to be overcome to get to where we are today. All proceeds of the book will go to charity.