

Exclusive Interview With Lesra Martin: One Of The Most Prominent Canadian Barristers

Written by Patricia Turnier

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Lesra Martin was born in 1963 to Earl and Alma Martin. He was the second eldest son of eight children. The family initially enjoyed a middle class lifestyle until Earl Martin suffered an injury and could no longer work. The family was soon mired in poverty, and was even homeless at some point. Lesra Martin was raised in Bed-Stuy (Bedford Stuyvesant), New York. When he was 10-11 years-old, he took the initiative to bag groceries and sweep up in a local bar. The siblings also had to work at an early age to support the family. Lesra Martin was poor, quasi-illiterate and dismissed by society. He struggled on the violent streets of Brooklyn. In spite of this situation, his heart was filled with the hope of élan and courage. In July 1979, a chance encounter with a group of Canadian entrepreneurs changed the course of his life; they saw his potential and pulled him from the chaos of the inner city. They brought him to Canada where he was given a fresh start. His journey and odyssey began in the fall of 1979, as he was struggling with quasi-illiteracy and self-doubt in Toronto. During his time in this city, he discovered the autobiography of the American boxer Rubin Hurricane Carter, *The 16th Round: From #1 Contender to Prisoner #45472*. It was the first book Martin ever bought in his life for 25 cents at a used book sale. Lesra Martin wrote to the boxer which eventually led to a genuine friendship between them. Martin and his sponsors later became heroes and the catalysts when they helped in the release of wrongfully convicted and imprisoned boxer Rubin Carter for the 1966 triple-murder of New Jersey residents, in November 1985. The reversal was big news, nationally and internationally. Rubin Carter's story had moved the world since his imprisonment. He received the support of many celebrities such as the world champion boxer Muhammad Ali. Who can also forget Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy's song Hurricane? Carter's story resulted in the 1991 best selling book *Lazarus and The Hurricane* which inspired the 1999 Hollywood blockbuster feature film *The Hurricane* starring Denzel Washington as Rubin Carter. The movie was directed by the high-profile Canadian Norman Jewison, a Governor-General Award recipient and an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker. The character and life of Lesra Martin was portrayed in this famous film by the actor Vicellous Reon Shannon. In 2000, it received a second Oscar nomination for Denzel Washington in the best actor category. He also received a Golden Globe award for *The Hurricane* as best actor in 2000. In 2002, an NFB documentary on Lesra Martin's inspiring life was produced, entitled *The journey of Lesra Martin*. This documentary was directed by Cheryl Foggo and produced by Selwyn Jacob. *The Journey of Lesra Martin* has been screened at film festivals throughout Canada and the world, among which, at the Hollywood Black Film Festival, Black Film Festival (San Francisco, U.S.), The Urban Literary Film Festival (Greensboro, U.S.), and the 24th International Durban Film Festival (Durban, South Africa).

In 1983, Martin graduated as an Ontario Scholar and completed his Honours BA in Anthropology at the University of Toronto in 1988. In 1997, he earned his law degree from one of the top law faculties in Canada, the Dalhousie Law School and served as Crown Prosecutor in Kamloops, British Columbia. He was also briefly enrolled in a doctoral program in Sociology at the University of Toronto. In this respect, having found the intestinal fortitude to change his

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own life, today Lesra Martin is a highly regarded civil lawyer with an expertise in personal injuries. He and his wife Cheryl Martin (parents of two girls) also a barrister are partners in their own law firm, Martin & Martin Lawyers. Lesra Martin is also a solicitor and worldwide motivational speaker. Since *The Hurricane* was released, Martin has received international attention, inspiring him to embark on a career as a motivational speaker. He was invited to speak before the General Assembly delegates of the United Nations, where he gave an impassioned speech about the devastating effects of illiteracy and poverty. He did the same thing in other venues such as Cambridge University, addressing world leaders. Lesra Martin also spoke to many national, community, and corporate groups, as well as companies such as IBM and General Motors, and literacy foundations, about his experiences and the devastating effects of illiteracy. Lesra Martin has made guest appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show and Larry King Live, among others. The Press media from The New York Times and The Washington Post to Sports Illustrated and Reader's Digest Magazine have chronicled aspects of his life. He has received the YMCA Black Achievers Partner in Excellence Award (Ohio), as well as numerous other awards and certificates of recognition.

Through his inspiring and empowering presentations, Lesra Martin demonstrates to audiences that the capacity to make a difference exists in each of us. Lesra Martin's life is a triumph of will over adversity. His unwillingness to accept the limitations of ghetto life allowed him to overcome and succeed against the odds. Mr. Martin strongly believes that limits exist only in the mind. The brilliant lawyer is a down-to-earth individual in spite of all his accomplishments which make people appreciate him even more. He has never forgotten who he was and where he came from. The late Coretta Scott King noted that "Young Lazarus will win your heart" in the best seller *Lazarus and the Hurricane*. Martin's new book *The Power of a Promise* was released on the 46th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, one of the most important orations of the 20th century delivered the 28th of August 1963. In this regard, we talked for one hour and a half to the author Lesra Martin the 28th of September 2009. He graciously shared his law expertise with us and spoke for the first time to the media through this present interview about his new book which was released the 28th of August 2009. **By the Editress-in-Chief and Jurist Patricia Turnier (The author owns a Master's Degree in law, LL.M).** □

WORLD PREMIERE CONVERSATION ABOUT MR. □ MARTIN'S FIRST BOOK, THE POWER OF A PROMISE

Patricia Turnier. □ In July 1979, you met the Canadian entrepreneurs. □ When you accompanied them □ for tutoring, what were your first impressions of Canada?

Lesra Martin. [Laughs] I loved the fact that it was quiet. My first impression in this country was the airport. It was so clean and calm. It was almost unreal. I wasn't used to that. In New York

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there are a lot of noises, traffic, etc. When I arrived in this country, the Canadians gave me a little tour of Toronto. They took me to one of the major arteries of the city, Yonge street which is one of the busiest area in Toronto. Even in Yonge street, I was amazed about how quiet it was if I compare it to NY.

P.T. When you were in the bookstore in 1980, you bought the autobiography of Rubin Carter which had a big impact in your life. The media reported that this book inspired you to believe in yourself. Which aspects of the book made you feel empowered?

L.M. Well, I would like to say first that earlier you asked me what was one of my first impressions of Canada. Obviously, you could think that my first inkling was to go from a black community in the ghetto to coming to Toronto in one of the most wealthiest areas. Only later, I began to recognize the cultural and race difference between me and the Torontonians. It took some adaptations from me. With time, I began to think that I was incapable of doing things. I started to believe that I was inferior because the reality of my new life began to sink in. The abundance of wealth and resources which were at my disposal made me realize how little I had back in NY. I began to compare. I said to myself that my surroundings (of the ghetto community) have achieved so little in NY. I felt at some point that I wasn't worthy to benefit from all the stuff in Toronto because I hadn't earned it. Before I discovered Carter's book, one of the ways the Canadians used to combat that fear of incapacity and inferiority was to expose me to a lot of positive things that Black people have done and achieved. The first book that they read to me was Frederick Douglass's autobiography My bondage and my freedom. Here was a fellow who could not read and write as a slave. He learned partly secretly with the help of the slave owner's wife how to read. Douglass became one of the most accomplished and prolific writers in America history. The Canadians exposed me to other books. They wanted to be sure that I would know more about my background and where I came from. I had to read books and newspapers out loud. We watched TV news and they asked my opinion on various subjects. They encouraged me to write things from my heart. This helped me to overcome my hurdles and sparked my interest in learning. That was the first step to feel more at ease to be exposed to other books.

In this respect, the Canadians took me to library sales. This is how I discovered Hurricane Carter's book, The Sixteenth round. The reason I responded so well to it was the fact that in my world a lot of things had to do with physical dominance and prowess as opposed to intellectual superiority of any sort. So, I responded to the physical image of a strong man which was depicted on the cover of Rubin's book. I felt immediately an emotion of strength and power (in the physical sense) by seeing the book. I technically judged the book at first by its cover because it responded to a need for me to feel stronger and more capable. I could definitely relate to Rubin by seeing his picture. Carter helped to free me from the prison of illiteracy.

P.T. You and the Canadians never doubted that Rubin Carter would go free. For more than five years, you dedicated your time with the Canadians to defend the Hurricane. It has been said that the Hurricane's file was probably the most litigated criminal case in U.S. history. You felt compelled to take up the cause. What made you decide to engage yourself seriously to freeing the Hurricane? Where did your confidence and the Canadians come from to believe he would be released?

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L.M. [Laughs] Sometimes, in life you do things because you don't know it is impossible to achieve them. I was 15 at the time and at that age we tend to be very idealistic. When I met the group of the Canadians, I had to face the hurdle of illiteracy with the emotional and psychological depth of that problem. When I went to the home of the Torontonians, we found ourselves in the frame of mind that it was possible to fight my illiteracy because we wanted to do it and we needed to do it. Failure was not an option. That frame of mind gave us the belief that when you set yourself to do something then you can achieve the ultimate goal. So, we were psychologically and emotionally strong at that time when we discovered the Hurricane's book. The belief that it was possible to do anything revealed itself in Rubin's case. We never allowed ourselves not even for a moment to think it would not be possible to release Rubin Carter. I have to add that I also compare my situation to the boxer's. It seemed incredible that an inner city kid would end up to have a chaperone group of Torontonians showing him a new world. They made me believe that I could have a different life. They could have given up on me and say to me: "we were just fooling around, we just wanted to show you what you don't have, flaunt our wealth in your face and we are going to leave". It would have been cruel. The same thing goes for Rubin. We could not just make him hope again and just leave. There was no room for believing anything else than hope and victory in the outcome of his case. This is true for many things in life. A positive perception makes all the difference to achieve goals.

P.T. I think Obama is one of the best examples. When he was seriously considering to become a candidate for presidency, we learned in the media that people of different origins told him that it wasn't the time and that he should become a candidate in 2012 as a vice-president. I could add that a lot of people create their own psychological barriers in their minds.

L.M. You are making an excellent point here which is totally relevant. Obama is a wonderful example of the attitude that someone needs to have to reach his goal from point A to point B by the strength of hope and belief. Often people respond to someone's commitment and passion. Before long, you can find a team of people working with you because they admire the driven spirit behind it. What I can also say about your excellent example is that there were people (regardless of the race) who thought that the election of a black president or a woman president would happen in 50 years. There were always another 50 years. Even when you are dealing with something that strong, it shows that when you commit yourself to that belief, that passion, that acceptance, there will not be another outcome because you strongly have faith in it. You will reach your goal despite the obstacles. So, regarding again Rubin Carter, I and the Canadians strongly believed that he would get out of prison. We were adamant about it and we were emotionally strong to do it.

P.T. How important does the faith a lawyer has in his client play a role in the outcome of a case?

L.M. When it comes to my work as a lawyer, I pick and chose my clients according to the

strength of my belief in that person. I work now almost exclusively on personal injury cases. I look at how devastating the impact has on the client. I analyse the consequence that the accident or the incident has been on the quality of the person's life and his emotional and psychological well-being. It is critical to have empathy. It must be horrible to wake up and see that your entire life changed dramatically after an accident. I compare it to Rubin's case. He was at the height of his career when he was arrested in the early 60s for murder. His entire effort that he has put forth to be on top as a boxer just vanished. It is so unfair to have that happen in someone's life. I look at how devastating it can be for my clients to have their lives destroyed. So, I just go at it.

I strongly believe that the faith you have in your client is definitely critical in the profession of law. It is for me. I can only speak for myself. When you really feel that your client should be defended fairly as a jurist you are going to put the amount of work and time required on the case. However, when I practiced criminal law as a Crown Prosecutor I took the cases so personally. I took the problems home and compared everything to Rubin's case. I could not separate things. It was one of my difficulties. In civil law, it is different and it suits me best. In this domain, we can get something back easier by protecting the interests of the person. Emotionally, it is easier for me to be successful in this arena.

P.T. It is written in the best selling book, Lazarus and the Hurricane, that there are more Black men and Native peoples in America's prisons than in its universities. As a jurist, what do you think needs to be corrected? Do you think it is required to have more diversity in the juries and in the judicial system as a whole?

L.M. The problem of having an overwhelming number of Black and Native Americans in prison, to me, is not only a problem in the judicial system but it is a systemic problem which needs to be addressed on a wider level. In a proper context, crime never occurs in a social vacuum. There are ingredients that necessitate crime. Those ingredients have a common denominator: a lack of access to opportunities, a deficient access to education and employment. As long as there is not a recognition of the existence of a systemic problem, we are not going anywhere. We need to address some of those problems. Look at my life, I was on the verge of disaster before I met the group of Torontonians because I was beginning to need things. I wanted things that I could not afford. In a dangerous ghetto community, life is about survival. I bagged groceries to get some money to help my family financially. We were on welfare and welfare money is never sufficient.

P.T. You don't have a childhood when you have that kind of responsibility.

L.M. Exactly! And as a kid you are not safe in the ghetto. You can be a target to all kinds of danger. I had to find a way to get away from gang members. One of my ways was to use my skateboard and fly with it like superman [laughs]. Seriously, in that kind of environment you become very vulnerable and you can start to do anything to survive. So, imagine what could have happened if I started down that road of crime. My life would have been totally different. We really have to begin to focus on how to provide the basic needs in a community so we can eliminate the compulsion for people to start getting involved in criminal activities. Again, as I said crime doesn't occur in a vacuum. We have to address the lack of opportunities, the lack of

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employment and the lack of quality education. By the age of 25, a great number of African Americans end up in prison or have problems with the law. This is unnecessary, unacceptable and would not happen if there were opportunities for them. Regarding more specifically the judicial system, it can become more representative of the community, among the public officers and so on. We need more diversity in the judicial system to ensure that people of all backgrounds can identify with the workers who will make the decisions in their cases. Cultural competency is imperative to understand the complexity and the origins of the social problems which lead to the crimes. We tend to think that the solution is to lock people away and we don't think about prevention. Punishment is not a deterrent to crime because often it is about crime related to material necessity. I am not justifying crime but we don't pay enough attention to the root of the problem. The best way to avoid crime is to create, to focus on opportunities and give concrete tools to people who want to improve their living conditions.

P.T. There are about 8 to 12% wrongly convicted people in the U.S. What is your position concerning capital punishment?

L.M. [silence] We need to eradicate capital punishment because I think we should not allow ourselves to be in a position to presume that we have the supreme right to sentence somebody to death. If we had a flawless criminal system with no areas of human error, I would have a different opinion about this. We see too many wrongly convicted people to make me feel comfortable with the idea that someone innocent can be put to death. It is an irreversible outcome. We see too many cases with DNAs where we recognised a huge deficiency in the criminal system when it comes to wrongly imprisoned people. As a result, I believe capital punishment should be eradicated altogether.

P.T. Only 3 percent of habeas corpus petitions are successful in the US and many of these are overturned on appeal. What do you think needs to be corrected in order to change this situation in the judicial system?

L.M. The use of habeas corpus was a necessary strategy to use (in New Jersey state) in the Rubin Carter case. Habeas corpus represents the last resort, the last writ to have your case reviewed by a Supreme court judge. More specifically, it is a legal action through which an individual can seek relief from the illegal detention of himself or another person. It protects the person from harming himself or from being harmed by the legal system. Historically, habeas corpus has been an important tool for the protection of individual freedom against arbitrary state action. The problem with habeas corpus is you cannot look at it in a vacuum. The difficulty isn't with habeas corpus itself, but it is the systemic state system which leads to the necessity of using habeas corpus. We have to focus on the state system where often the criminal cases get stuck on the state level (which was the case of Rubin Carter). Every single time, when new evidence comes to light you have to go back down to the bottom level of the state and get through the entire system. The problem with that is it becomes really difficult for human being to change beliefs. The guilt of the person is already established in the mind of those players at the

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state level. The job is to change their state of mind which can be very difficult. Regarding capital punishment, the habeas corpus is also the last chance. I have a problem with that because I know how it is not easy to get through the state level and have one shot. It is such a difficult battle. This should definitely be changed. Before the necessity of an habeas corpus application, more reviews would be required.

P.T. How did you feel when you first found out that your life would be portrayed in The Hurricane movie, and what did you think of the performance of Vicellous Reon Shannon, the actor who portrayed your character?

L.M. You know, when I first realized that I would become one of the subjects of The Hurricane film, I was delighted. I felt honored to get the opportunity throughout that movie to share a little bit about my background. One of the main messages I wanted the viewers to get was the fact that people should never give up on achieving their dreams. I was excited when I thought about my life retrospectively. I was a ghetto kid who had something to do with giving an opportunity to a legend boxer. I felt rich because of that. Furthermore, Denzel Washington was the person chosen to play the Hurricane role and Vicellous Shannon was selected to play my role. I felt honored to see those highly qualified actors attached to the movie. I think Denzel did an outstanding job playing Rubin. I consider he was denied an Oscar for that performance. I think also Vicellous did a remarkable job playing me. I strongly believe it was an excellent choice. I thought about Vicellous this morning. There is a little talk right now of doing a movie on one of the chapters of my new book.

P.T. This is very interesting.

L.M. I was wondering who might play the role. I can't talk too much about that at this point.

P.T. So, you are going to keep us in suspense!

L.M. [Laughs] Exactly! When I think of actors, I always have been fascinated by Will Smith because of his professional journey. You know, the story of his show Fresh Prince of Bel Air is similar to my experience. The difference was it concerned a kid from the ghetto who lived with his rich African American uncle. I ended up to be in a rich white area. I always have been fascinated by Will because of that role and I think that he could be an excellent candidate for the new movie.

P.T. When The Hurricane movie came out in 1999, your story more than ever didn't belong to you anymore. You had to share it with the world. How did you deal with that? How did it change your life?

L.M. This experience brought me to a world totally foreign to me previously, a world where you get to do some exciting things like going on Oprah, on Larry King, having to speak before the world delegate of the United Nations or going to the Oscar celebration and so on. Those experiences can never be forgotten. There were events that I could never had imagine growing up in a ghetto community. I was not able to read and write properly. I could never have thought what the future would have in store for me. I could not imagine that I would have the

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opportunity to approach these people. This is beyond my wildest dreams. However, I am also a very pragmatic person. I was raised well despite the lack of opportunity I had when I was younger. My mother was a very practical person with lots of wisdom. In my book, I wrote several expressions she used at the time when I was growing up during my childhood which helped me to be grounded. She had this expression: "Never get too big for your britches". You should always remember ultimately who you are and where you came from. As a result of that, it allowed my past and my background to enrich me as opposed to enslave me. In this respect, the experiences of The Hurricane movie and the public appearances make me put everything into perspective. I use those events in my life to empower me as opposed to let it go into my head in an insignificant way.

P.T. You were very involved in the process of making the movie The Hurricane. Can you elaborate on that?

L.M. You know with the making of the movie The Hurricane, I got the great opportunity to be directly involved in many respects. It was great to work with the actors Denzel, Vicellous, John Hannah, Deborah Kara Unger and so on. I could participate on set and give my opinion. Sometimes, during shootings everybody was quiet and the director yelled cut! I was somewhere on set in the background and he called me because he needed my feedback. Jewison wanted to be sure that the scene was done accurately as much as possible. He used to say: "Tell us how this has to be done". I didn't know where to put myself and I was like hmm what I am going to say right now to the crew! [laughs]. Even if I felt honored that the director valued my opinion, I often answered do your own stuff [laughs]. Seriously, I have great respect for the director Jewison who established an excellent reputation in North America. He is one of the top Hollywood directors. He wanted my input for several scenes. It was important for him to be sure that the things really went the same way in my life. It was a great opportunity for me to be involved in a really hospitable atmosphere with a very talented, experienced and creative cast. It was a learning and very stimulating experience for me.

P.T. In the NFB documentary The Journey of Lesra Martin, we learn that besides the Torontonians, there were other people in your life who helped you become the man that you are today. Could you comment on that?

L.M. [silence] You know, my life has been filled with miraculously good people. When you grow up in a difficult environment sometimes you overlook the positive influence of some individuals who helped you along the way. With the writing of my book, I got the opportunity to reflect on my life in NY. I shared with the readers a story in particular on an elderly lady, Mrs Costa, who helped me become the man that I am today. When I was bagging groceries at the age of 12, I met her. She was legally blind, walking with her cane and her dog. She came into the store one day and allowed me to assist her by carrying her groceries and walking her home. This woman became such a significant figure in my life because she opened up for me a world that existed in NY city that I wasn't aware of. She allowed me to come to her peaceful home. She lived in a brownstone building in Brooklyn behind bars on the windows and the doors. In other words, there was all sort of protection from the outside world. It was just her and her dog. She allowed me to come into her world. When I stepped into her home time after time until I became a person that she could rely on, I did her groceries, the cleaning work, I walked the dog for her,

etc. She fed me and gave me money to take care of my family. This gave me the opportunity to stop trying to earn tips elsewhere because of her higher compensation. She taught me also a lot about NY and about who I am. Picture this, here I am, I had to find a way to survive and to feed my family. She always spoke to me from her heart, knowing that she was vulnerable. She could not see, didn't trust anybody, but she trusted me. I felt honored. She had so many valuable things and resources in her home. I could have picked lots of things (crystal glasses, jewelries, albums, etc) without her knowing about it. She worked hard all her life as a seamstress and saved her money. She has put her two children in school. Her oldest daughter worked for the Reagan administration in Washington, DC.

In her home, she exposed me to her world. Her neighborhood was filled before with African American professionals (doctors, lawyers, dentists, etc). She lived among them. They had fancy parties at her house. She was an excellent seamstress and dressed them all [laughs]. She was highly respected in the community. She told me stories about how safe the neighborhood was at the time. I didn't realize that type of world existed.

Grandma Costa believed in me at a time when I hardly had faith in myself. She broadened my strength and showed me my potential. She brought life, hope and grace into my life. Do you know what else I realized with her? I came to the conclusion that I didn't have it in me to abuse this lady or take advantage of her in any way. It made me feel really rich. It gave me the ability to respond later to people like her. With time, she became more frail. Despite how dependent she became on me because of her aging, she taught me a lot of things. I loved her company. I went to her place everyday after school to help her.

P.T. You were like her caregiver.

L.M. Exactly, and she was my protector. She allowed me to go to her home, I felt safe and not alone in the streets. She taught me that I didn't have that gene in me. I mean the ability to take advantage of someone despite the desperate circumstances that I was in which can justify a lot of things. Later, I shared with her what was happening with the group of Torontonians who came into my life. They offered me the opportunity to go away and get an excellent education. She sat me down one day. She touched my hand to get my attention. She looked at me with her blind eyes and said you have to get this opportunity to have an excellent education. Nobody can't ever take away from you what you learned.

P.T. It is a really beautiful story that you are sharing with us. Even if she was blind, she opened your eyes to a lot of things.

L.M. Certainly. She taught me that without an excellent education people live in darkness. She was a clear-eye woman. In other words, she was and still is an eye-opener for me. Despite the fact that she was blind, she could see much more than most people. This blind woman helped me to see. There is valuable wisdom you cannot find in books. It exists in the hearts and minds of our elders. Only one heart can teach another heart what the written word doesn't say. They pass along our history and the treasure of our ancestors. One of my main motivations in life was to make Grandma Costa proud of me. I admire her kindness and generosity. She has let me know (after my announcement that I was considering the offer of the Torontonians to follow

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them) that she will make it even if I would not be there anymore to take care of her. She encouraged me to go despite how dependent she was on me. She is a very generous person. She wanted me to take full advantage of this great opportunity and have access to intellectual freedom. This is a valuable lesson to me.

P.T. I believe that this great opportunity happened to you because you cared for her. I think that when you do good things, it comes back to you most of the time.

L.M. Absolutely. When you do good things, you should not do it because you expect to have something great happen to you. When you do it from the right perspective, things have a way to come back in full circle. The full circle for me consisted of having my path of people who could help me. This makes things harmonious and balanced. If it wasn't for the encouragement of Grandma Costa, I don't think I would have been able to take the step to join the Canadians. I trusted and believed in her so much that her opinion mattered. I value her points of view and I am eminently proud of her. She is like a grandmother to me. She used to speak to my own grandmother (now 102 years old) and they became friends. Their relationship remained after my departure from NY. For me, it was amazing to see those black matriarchs guiding me. I know the key to overcome the odds is to hide behind those powerful brownstone's ladies. There are grandmothers in NY city who are afraid to open up their worlds and their homes to the youth but they are the keys. We need their knowledge.

There are good things in almost every situation. The violence of my neighborhood overshadowed the experience of this elderly lady until I could leave the area. I didn't realise how beautiful and miraculous this experience was until I was able to get out and look back on it. Grandma Costa gave me the thing missing when the Canadians needed to find a way to feel proud of who I am. I mean that she was the example which came into my mind of strong black people who are role models. This allowed me to balance the feeling of negativity and inferiority that I felt during my early exposure to my new life in Toronto.

There was another person who inspired me: Sam, a man who owned a bar. He was another fellow that I met when I was bagging groceries. Actually, I met him prior to Grandma Costa. Sam allowed me to help him in his bar. I cleaned it up. Meanwhile, he gave me dinners and he would tip me. I did that at least for a couple of months. I violated his trust at one time. For days, he forgot to tip me. I needed the money to put food on my family's table. I found the money and helped myself to 15\$ in change. I will never forget it because I felt so guilty afterward and it became a life lesson. I felt justified at the time to take the money for my family. I figured he just forgot to pay me. As you grow older, you realize that there is always a means to deal with things in a proper way. I felt he owed me the tip and I felt entitled to it. But it was the wrong way to go about it even if I wasn't paid on time. This lesson taught me that I never wanted to feel bad like this again. Grandma Costa came into my path shortly after Sam. I never had the urge to violate her trust in me because I never wanted to feel that way again. It was an incredible experience because it gave me the opportunity to know more about myself and about what I was made of in my difficult environment.

P.T. In the past, you said to the media that you were working on your autobiography. What happened to this project? Do you plan to pen your autobiography in the future?

L.M. My new book *The Power of a Promise* to some extent is an autobiography because I share some examples and insights of my life. I received so far great response from my community and among the publication world. As we speak, I am working on book number 2. *The Power of a Promise* was a critical book for me to write. It was important for me to share the rich background of the ghetto world where I lived. I put emphasis on people who taught me a lot such as Grandma Costa or Sam, the bar owner. My book no 2 is a continuation of *The Power of a Promise* where I will take six different areas (like my first book) where we need today to focus on as a country and as a world. I look into six areas of development which I think are critical for our way of thinking in our contemporary world. I will do that by using other aspects of my life. I will use the six elements and relate them to examples of my life journey. So, I chose this kind of formula instead of writing a memoir about my life.



P.T. Your new book *The Power of a Promise* is filled with thoughts, insights and practical guidance for gearing the everyday challenges we all face. Your book takes us on a journey about the life we are meant to live. Could you elaborate on the main messages you would like to communicate to the readers?

L.M. You know, for me *The Power of a Promise* is a compact little book that shares some stories of my own life which kept me grounded and focused on some of my hopes and my dreams. My book is different in the sense that it is not a practical guide in the formula usually applied to other self-help books. It was important for me to use examples of my life. I believe you can talk in particular about what you know. You can't escape who you are. People can't run from the difficult battles they go through from their childhood in a very tough environment. That part always stays with them. People can be haunted by their past. The biggest motivating factor for me in *The Power of a Promise* then, was the ability to overcome my background.

P.T. This is what is called resilience.

L.M. Definitely. It is also the key to overcome hindrances and hurdles. It was important for me to share this with the readers. I strongly believe that with faith, it is possible to overcome problems for the most part. I made a promise to myself that I would do everything to make my life better and it changed my entire life. It is important for people to stay focused on their dreams and goals. It can be easy to scatter but we have to make an effort to persevere. The enemy can be ourselves. For my part, throughout my journey I read a lot of self-help books which were useful to me. Everybody has his struggles and the most important thing is what you make of them. A negative perspective on things can be destructive and detrimental. The inner struggles need to be overcome. With my book I wanted to lay a foundation which can help people.

P.T. Your book centers on six important elements that provide focus on life. Can you share with us what those elements are, as well as their significance?

L.M. First of all, the six important elements are hope, heart, human spirit, dreams, determination, and discipline. In each area, I made a promise to myself throughout my life to stay focused. Hope is the beginning of all things. Everything starts with that. Without hope there is no future. Hope gives us the ability to believe that anything is possible. Hope is also a state of mind that encourages us to work for something. It is the answer to overcome hurdles. The heart is a muscle, the more we use it, the stronger it grows. It is important throughout life to be guided by your heart. The heart has reasons that logic cannot comprehend—let your heart be your guide. Regarding the human spirit, the spirit that resides deep within each one of us is a stranger to both fear and failure. Spirit provides us with the ability to get back up and keep fighting no matter how many times we have been knocked down or counted out. Human spirit knows but one thing—how to try. If you've ever watched a young child attempt to tie a shoelace or zip a coat, you will know this to be true. About the dreams, I can say it represents the imaginings of what we can make happen in our lives. Dreams can be big and seem unrealistic at first glance, but they fill us with desire and inspiration. That is their purpose. When we are too afraid to hope and dream, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to make a better life. So, it is important to allow yourself to dream. Although dreams are free, the achievement of our dreams often requires a great investment of effort on our part. And when we dream big, undoubtedly, obstacles come into our path. To keep going, we will need both dedication and determination. Determination is the grit that gets us to our goal. Finally, discipline is the ability we all possess to stay focused on our dreams and to remain determined in the pursuit of our purposes—even in the face of temptation. In the world we live in, it's all too easy to find shortcuts, to focus on indulging our immediate desires, to lay aside our principles and forget about our goals. Discipline is the force that keeps us on the right path by not scattering around, the knife that slashes through our fears.

P.T. You previously mentioned that you considered it a miracle to pen your first book since you were illiterate as a teenager. Could you further comment on that point?

L.M. I consider this as a miracle because there was a time that I had to deal with my problems with reading and writing. Once I was an inner city kid in Brooklyn dismissed by society. I was able to accomplish the miracle to pen my first book by making a commitment to myself and find the ways to fulfill this promise. The key factor in overcoming obstacles is a strong belief that it is possible to move beyond limiting circumstances. In fact, most of the limits are stored in our own minds. With my book, I wanted to share with people my journey and to uncover their hidden strengths to fulfill their own goals and dreams. I strongly believe that each of us has the potential for a great life. People possess gifts which can be shared with others and I hope my book will be part of their journey to discover the miracles which are inside of them.

P.T. Are you planning a promotional tour for your new book in North America, Europe, in England for instance, and the Caribbean in the upcoming months?

L.M. For now, my NY publicist is planning my tour in North America, more specifically in Canada and the US. I want to demystify the literary world because some people are afraid of

Written by Patricia Turnier

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books or words. My own struggle with illiteracy is a testament that it is possible to overcome this hurdle. I will share with the public my journey and I hope that I will inspire people to achieve their own goals. The most important thing for me is to meet the readers on my tour.

P.T. We know that illiteracy was one of the biggest challenges you had to overcome in your life. You had to start working when you were ten years old. You spoke to many people, groups, and corporations worldwide and to the General Assembly delegates at the United Nations about the devastating effect of illiteracy. Right now, in the world, over 122 million children are working and are deprived of education. As a jurist and activist, what do you think could be done to rectify this situation? What legal international tools could be used to protect those children? How could literacy be better promoted in developing countries?

L.M. This may sound real simplistic to you. One of the most important things is that we have to get back to the basic. We must allow kids to be kids. They have to know that they are allowed to dream. This is the foundation of everything. They have to feel protected and safe. The fact that so many kids right now are deprived of education and have to work in the world, robs their humanity. It takes a village to raise a child and we lost that philosophy in many parts of the world. The well-being of the youth is our responsibility. I believe everything starts at home. Children learn from parents when you set an example for them. For instance, parents cannot instill in their kids the love of education if their own children never see them read the newspaper or anything else on a regular basis. They must recognize that they have to play an active role in helping their kids. If the parents are not educated they have the responsibility to make sure that other people in their surroundings take an active part in their children's learning process. Studies proved that kids learn better when educators, parents and community members all play a role in literacy advancement. On a larger scale, corporations, organizations have a duty in helping America's youth. The fight against illiteracy takes place on a wide scale and requires great financial resources and efforts. The existing worldwide organizations fighting illiteracy need to be recognised and encouraged to make sure that they can outreach to as many at-risk kids as possible around the world through nations large-scale reading projects.

P.T. How do you see your role as a literacy advocate?

L.M. I think that I can only live by example. But on a larger level, as a society we have the responsibility to provide a decent education for the youth. I use my voice to enlighten people on the importance of literacy and the devastating effects when people are deprived of it. As a spokesperson for organizations such as an APB speaker (The American Program Bureau speaker), it is the way I chose to advocate on this issue. I see it as an obligation and I strongly believe that as a society we cannot afford to neglect education among our youth. We all know this famous quote: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste". In summary, I see myself as

an advocate for youth education. When I have the opportunity, I speak at different forums around the world to establish a rapport with a diverse audience and world leaders.

P.T. I am sure that the words “impossible” and “can’t” are not part of your vocabulary, Mr. Martin. We read on your web site (<http://www.lesra.com>) and in your new book that when you were in grade 10, you told your class that you dreamed of becoming a lawyer. After a long uncomfortable pause, your teacher leaned over and whispered that you were meant to be a garbage man or to do something with your hands. She added that you needed to do something more realistic with your life. Childhood dreams did not exist where you grew up in Bed-Stuy, but you took advantage of the opportunities that life gave you and you succeeded against all odds. Do you have a message of hope for kids and young people who believe they are not smart or who are surrounded by negative people?

L.M. I want to simply say to young people that they have to focus on positive people and on people who set an example with their own lives. Actions speak louder than words. When I began to work in the bar, I met Grandma Costa who gave me the positive energy to keep on going. As you well said, I definitely don't believe in the words “can't” and “impossible”. Those words do not match with the human spirit. We can do anything if we set our minds to it. The moment someone believes that he can't accomplish something, this is when failure occurs. I challenge people all the time to look on positive things. In almost every difficult situation, there is a lesson to learn and there is a positive avenue where you can focus. I would like kids to know that it is important to not have fears. They must not think that they are not good enough to achieve their goals. They must aspire to be successful. It is imperative to try. The real failure is to not try. They have to surround themselves with people who believe in them. When you listen to people who do not believe in you, you give them power. I would like to say also to young people that if one door is blocked, move to another door which can be wider. It is important to always try to adapt. If negative people try to stop you, find a way to persevere. People progress with determination and established goals. In a more pragmatic manner, young people can join organizations such as Big Brother Big Sisters of America or the Boys and Girls Clubs which provide guidance. To finish, I am going to leave the readers with this quote (that I love) from Oprah: “You define your own life. Don't let other people write your script”.

P.T. Thank you so much Mr. Martin for this rich and candid conversation. Thanks for sharing your legal expertise and speaking to us about your new book. It was an honour and a privilege to interview you!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsmszHWnO3k>

Books

- Lazarus and the Hurricane, Sam Chaiton and Terry Swinton, 1991
- The Power of a promise: Life Lessons Encountered on my Journey from Illiteracy to a Lawyer, Lesra Martin with Tashon Ziara, 2009

These books are available on www.amazon.com or .ca and www.barnesandnoble.com

DVD

- The Hurricane (1999) (available on www.amazon.com or .ca)
- The journey of Lesra Martin (2002) (available on www.amazon.ca or www.nfb.ca)

Memberships:

Lesra Martin holds a Lifetime membership with the National Black Caucus of Special Educators, a division of the CEC (Washington, D.C.)

Martin is on the board of the Boys and Girls Club (Kamloops) Awards :

- The YMCA Black Achievers Partner in Excellence Award (Ohio)
- In April, 2000, Lesra Martin was honoured with an award from the Council for Exceptional Children.

EXCERPTS FROM LESRA MARTIN'S NEW BOOK, THE POWER OF A PROMISE:

- Promise to Focus on the Positive:

To change your life you have to change the messages in you!

Changing the messages that play in our head is an important part of changing our focus. Often, we aren't even aware of how negative and limiting those messages are. If you want to go somewhere, tell yourself you belong there. If you want to accomplish something, tell yourself you are capable. If you want to move forward in your life, turn that negative voice into a positive one.

We all have struggles. We all have difficulty staying focused on what is truly important in our lives. What we do during those times of struggle, how we face up to our difficulties, and whether or not we are able to refocus on our priorities is what determines our ultimate success in life. One of the biggest challenges I faced in my own life was illiteracy. Little did I know that, in finding a way to overcome my problem, I would discover a valuable tool I could use to tackle all of the other challenges that I would encounter.

- ***Use your passion to LEARN!***

Some people accept their lot in life! Lack of motivation or enthusiasm is something that keeps a lot of people from doing things that would make their lives richer and happier. An important part of being ready to LEARN is not just accepting the way things are if they aren't working for you. If you don't like the way your life is going, don't settle. Scramble the pieces and continue to look for a better way to fit them together. It's never too late to flip the coin and try something new. It's never too late to learn a few new tricks. LEARN from the people you encounter! We can learn a lot from the people we meet if we pay attention. Make the most of your time, LEARN to engage!

- **Promise to stay focused on your goals**

The big secret in life is that there is no big secret. Whatever your goal, you can get there if you're willing to work.

Oprah Winfrey

One of the sayings my grandmother always used when I was young is, "Life will throw you curveballs, but if you continue to swing away, you just never know when you might hit a home run." All through her life, Granny has practiced what she preached, and because of that she has been an inspiration in my life. Even with the hardships she has endured, I don't recall even one time when she let circumstances get the better of her. She always stayed focused on what needed to be done, on taking care of business, and on taking care of the family. That's the kind of determination I try to emulate in my life.

- The human mind is, no doubt, capable of remarkable things. In large part this is due to the power of imagination and the inability of the subconscious mind to differentiate between what is real and what we have made up. We can use this power to help us or hinder us. We can choose to dwell on the disappointments in our life (replaying them over and over like a never-ending horror movie), or we can make a promise to ourselves to create our own

Exclusive Interview With Lesra Martin: One Of The Most Prominent Canadian Barristers

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“highlights reel” of the positive experiences we’ve had and make them the main feature in our head.

- As I was growing up, my mother always said, “You have to dress for the job you want, not the job you have. You have to think for the life you want, not for the life you have”. Making that promise to myself helped me to start to focus on where I wanted to be, on what I wanted to accomplish, and on the life I wanted to build.