



A Light in the West

The Singh family of Ethel Street bring Divali back to St James

Young **SHAKEEL SINGH** holds a shaft of split bamboo in place as the event's showpiece, **DEREK'S** blimp, begins to take shape.



Cepep workers begin detail work on the cart that is their contribution to the celebration.



ROCKY BOODOO and **IAN "SUGARS" HOSEIN** split bamboo to size.



Brothers **DEREK** and **GERALD SINGH** shape bamboo hoops for the blimp effigy.



As night falls, **DEREK SINGH'S** work is illuminated by overhead lamps and the lights of passing cars.

ONCE A YEAR for the past seven years, retired businessman Bheem Singh, his wife Marjorie and their adult children have brought the lights of Divali to the St James side street just outside their home.

The Singhs have celebrated Divali at their Ethel Street home for the last 45 years, but seven years ago, looking around at the young children in the home who had never taken part in a proper "lighting up," the family decided to embrace the neighbourhood and open their celebration to the public.

"They didn't know about Divali," says Bheem Singh. "I wanted them to see how it should be celebrated." And he's succeeded, the children are now called on in school to explain Divali to their classmates and bring deyas into class as the festival draws nearer.

The Ethel Street event has grown over the years into one that commands the whole block with ornate bamboo bendings depicting (this year), a cannon, a cowboy style cart and a blimp, raised high on a wooden riser studded with blazing deyas. It cost the family \$20,000 to prepare for Divali in

2006 and they do it with no official help and valued assistance from extended family and neighbours.

The work is guided by the second generation of Singh men, Derek, Sean and Gerald, and the work accelerates in the week before Divali with the help of a rotating group of young men, some extended family, some friends from the neighbourhood. They put hand, cutlass and pliers to work bending, shaping and binding the bamboo into the designs that will eventually decorate the street, illuminated by the flickering clay pots.

The formidable Singh women, led by chief cook Cheryl Boodoo and aided by a phalanx of serious aunts, nieces, in-laws and supporters begin their work the night before the celebration, stripping bhagi and slicing pumpkins in huge mounds.

The food, prepared in a massive cooking session that begins at mid-morning will eventually feed more than 500 people later that night, anyone who comes to share the in the light that the Singhs have set to flame against the darkness.

"When I'm gone," Bheem Singh says with a satisfied smile, "my children will carry this on."

Photographs and story by **MARK LYNDERSAY**



Friends and extended family cut pumpkins down to size.



ASHA MAHARAJ, KABRINA RAHIM and SARANA SINGH prepare bodi.



CHERYL BOODOO, assisted by CARL CASSIE, checks the progress of the channa pot.



Matriarch MARJORIE and daughter MARCIA package traditional sweets.



The driveway leading to the Singh's home is washed by SEAN SINGH as it is prepared to become the extended kitchen.



BHEEM SINGH leads his family in offering prayers to Mother Lakshmi as the evening darkens into Divali night.



LEFT: MISS MONICA, at top left, a family friend who has peeled potatoes and shared food keeps tabs on the meal's distribution.



RIGHT: GERALD SINGH tends to the lights along with hundreds of others who ensured that the deyas remained lit.