

DOCTOR PRENEUR



DR JOSIE MUSCAT IS THE FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN OF THE ST JAMES HOSPITAL GROUP WHICH WAS FOUNDED IN 1984. THE 72 YEAR-OLD ENTREPRENEUR SPEAKS TO MARIKA AZZOPARDI ABOUT HIS MOTIVATIONS, ASPIRATIONS AND THOUGHTS ABOUT REACHING 82 YEARS.

TS: Why become a doctor?

I became a doctor due to circumstances. My father was a doctor, all my uncles and my grandfather were doctors, so coming from a family of doctors, I never really considered anything else, apart from the fact that way back in 1964, there were very few university courses to choose from.

TS: Last July you celebrated 72 years of age. What do you consider to be your greatest two achievements?

As a family man my greatest achievement is having made the right choice of wife. My wife and I have been married for almost 50 years and I don't regret a single minute. We have six children and over the years we have managed to give five of them the education they wanted and each of them has his or her own profession. The youngest daughter was born with Down syndrome and our great satisfaction is that she has reached specific milestones over the years.

As a doctor my greatest achievement is having introduced several new systems in Malta, as well as machinery and techniques (such as MRI, keyhole surgery, PET Scan and IVF), which have helped a great number of people and eventually introduced also by government in state hospitals and clinics. Financially speaking, this was a great blow to me, but I opened venues for doctors and specialists, and my initiatives have been of benefit to innumerable patients.

TS: How was the Saint James Group set up?

Saint James Group started from a small room which I used as a GP. In the seventies, when private hospitals were closed by the government of the day, I opened a small private clinic with two beds. Subsequently, my children joined me and we never looked



back. We kept investing and growing over the years and the various branches gave scope to the creation of the group.

TS: What is the story behind the name 'Saint James Group'?

The name was inspired by the location which is St James Square in Żabbar.

TS: In what can be regarded as the sole reconsideration of the Saint James Group, you closed the Saint James Ghajnsielem hospital. What are your thoughts about this?

Saint James Ghajnsielem closed after only four years in operation, but this was not because of a lack of success, but because the necessary profits to keep it running were not reached. The Gozitans typically use free hospital service at the main hospital and for such a small population the private hospital was not a profitable venture.

TS: You were also very active in the political scene. Amongst other things, you founded the Front Freedom Fighters and the Alleanza Nazzjonali. What motivated you to go into politics?

I have always been very active since my school days when I was president of the Crusaders at St Aloysius College. Eventually I



Josie & daughter Nicole meeting actor Chris Berg



80's political demonstrations

moved from this very active group to help found the Sodality Group of which I was eventually president. At sixth form I was also president of the Older Boys Sodality Group. In 1966, during my sixth year as medical student, I saw my chance of joining the Nationalist Party as a candidate for the second district. The Front Freedom Fighters was a political organisation I set up to encourage people living in the south to openly profess their Nationalist leanings and to stop them being discriminated against. In 1984, I did not contest the elections since I was not in agreement with the way the party was moving ahead. In 1992, I was approached by a number of disgruntled people who wanted help to organise Alleanza Nazzjonali which could have been a successful third party. But when it comes to votes, people tend to side with one of the two big parties.

TS: You are also the founder of the Eden Foundation. Where do you see Malta heading when it comes to services for the physically or mentally challenged persons?

When my sixth child Nicole was born with Down Syndrome, I came in touch with the reality of having a child with mental and physical disability. At the time, the country offered rudimentary facilities to assist parents and clients. I even considered going abroad for such assistance as was required. We travelled to Munich's Kinder Zentrum where we provided our daughter with the necessary therapy and education. One fine day, we decided to do something about it in Malta. Some good people I knew accepted to be trustees of the Foundation and we started from a first meeting at Dar Tal-Kleru and proceeded to occupy rent-free premises (thanks to Dennis Zammit Cutajar) in St Paul's Street, Valletta. This is where the first children were engaged. The Foundation started with 25 children and their parents, and kept growing until we moved to premises in Bulebel which had been earmarked for government use, but were never occupied.



Queen Elizabeth II officially opening Eden Foundation

I have been away nearly 10 years now, so I am not in touch with the goings-on of the Foundation, but what was started helped people with mental and physical disabilities. Today they can avail themselves of job coaches and achieve qualifications from the UOM. If anything, we have helped to raise awareness in this regard.

TS: Recently, you were in the news since Saint James Capua Hospital has been sold off. Can you possibly share with us the reasons which led you to part from your flagship investment, after running it for 12 years?

The reasons behind our decision to sell this hospital (it has not been sold yet), were twofold. First, I was foreseeing that the Health Department policy would eventually close us up, that the health system would be in the hands of foreigners, and that the health situation has become a political ball. Secondly, my great wish has always been to have a hospital in the south of Malta. Since I did not have the necessary funds to do so, I had to sell Capua to be able to construct a new hospital in Tarxien.

TS: In hindsight, is there a particular decision in your life which you would not have taken or taken in a different way?

I believe that had I not clashed head-on with the leader of the Nationalist Party, I would have advanced considerably in my political life. But thankfully, when I left politics, I believe I was instrumental in opening up new medical venues for our patients. That, in the end, is more satisfying.

TS: Any future plans?

I dream of seeing the new southern hospital inaugurated.

S: How would you wish to describe an 82 year Josie Muscat?

JM: Active, energetic, still innovative, with a clear, determined mind, and a strong heart... I'll have to pray hard for all that. Hitting 82? 🍀

I READ THE SYNAPSE BECAUSE...

It always contains interesting information and keeps its readers up-to-date