

Naomi Fowler: This is the Corruption Diaries from the Tax Justice Network. I'm Naomi Fowler.

St. Kitts had a number of sugar plantations. This goes back to the original colonial period when there were British planters and a lot of slaves on the island who produced the sugar cane.

And the government finally became a government that was a democratic government. And now the planters were confronted with the government saying, we are going to nationalize these sugar cane fields and the sugar business because we can't continue with the arrangement you've got. Anyway, the government nationalized one of the sugar plantations, and the owner said we insist that we be compensated for what you've taken and indeed the law in St. Kitts required compensation. But it also required the creation of a three person commission to evaluate the land and decide what the compensation should be. And because of this friend of mine, I was appointed as one of the three members of the board, it was called the Board of Assessment. And I was one of three who would listen to testimony, be involved in hearings, and come up with a number that made sense, presumably.

This all started around two thousand one, two, somewhere in there, maybe three, but in any event we didn't get a final result of that for a full ten years. The government pulled all kinds of shenanigans to try to keep from having a final resolution that would require it to disgorge any cash. But meanwhile, the island had all of these drug traffickers and it was quite a lively place.

We'll start with the story of Little Nut Miller. Little Nut was a St. Kitts native who started by running marijuana into the United States, kind of low order. But then he graduated and he moved up to Jamaica where he had even larger shipments and he had a whole gang of helpers and finally began running operations in the United States. And lo and behold, he and his crew get arrested. The crew was a little slow on the uptake, and what he did was he gave them up as a government witness, and got off the hook, and then beat it in a hurry back to St. Kitts, where with the money he had made in the drug business he financed the election of the next prime minister, and among other things, built himself a house on the land that was part of this land that had been taken by the government.

Now it was pretty obvious that we've got a super problem in terms of evaluating the land. Where does it go? How does it go? And over the period of the next ten years with on and off hearings, maybe one or two a year, court cases, delays of different kinds, a variety of stories of both corruption and malfeasance and misfeasance begin to surface.

So, for example the first question was, what is the land in question that we're talking about? Well, the system of property recordation in St. Kitts was like it was on many islands, there was a master deed that was written back God knows when, when the plantations were operating. And the only things that were actually measured were the fields where the sugar was grown, not hillsides, not gullies, not anything that might be usable but was not capable of being used to grow the sugarcane. And then whenever some of the land was sold off, they would literally write on the master deed that X percentage or Y amount in a certain part had been sold off with a description. But there was nothing like the kind of thing you would find here where there are surveyors and they'll give you meets and bounds and tell you precisely

where and what and how. So that was the first problem. What is the land that we're talking about?

But then there was also this, that pieces had been sold off over time from the time of the nationalization. And the buyers in some cases had been interesting. One case was there's a veterinary school in St. Kitts. Now there's also a medical school, but the veterinary school had purchased some of this land for its own facilities. So we asked what the veterinary school had paid for the land because what you're looking for are comparable values. Well, the veterinary school had paid a very large amount of money per acre for the land. And I start asking, well, why shouldn't we value the rest of the land at the same price?

The hearings were running at this point, breaks for lunch, and the Attorney General of St. Kitts comes up to me and said, no, we can't use that number. I said, why not? Because it includes the payoff that the veterinary school made to the then government to have this arrangement. This is the Attorney General of the island who's saying this to me, which I found somewhat astonishing. But I'd been around the island long enough to know that in a place where Little Nut Miller has a house high on the hill, almost anything is possible.

In the end, after ten years of hearings and all sorts of shenanigans, including a case that was where I was sued as a member of the Board of Assessment with the other members in an effort to stop the proceedings temporarily because some real estate agent claimed he had rights to a piece of the land,

I came into the clerk of court office in St. Kitts and I said, may I see a copy of the lawsuit? I'm named in it. And the response was, no, it's secret. I said, excuse me, I'm a named defendant in the lawsuit, I would like a copy of the complaint. So no, we, we've just passed these confidentiality rules and the only person who can see it is going to be the lawyer who defends the Board of Assessment. I, you know, I, you, your jaw drops. But that, that was among many things that happened, except I learned that dealing with Caribbean island government is like operating in a small town anywhere because everybody knows everybody else's business.

So, at one point I was staying at a hotel in Nevis because I was nervous about being around the crowd that was hanging with Little Nut Miller and the folks in St. Kitts. And I thought I'd take the ferry over, to and from, to the hearing so I could be there for the hearing but I'd physically be on the other island, which is only a short distance away when I was not involved in the hearing. So I'm standing one day waiting for the ferry and this drunk comes weaving up to me and says, oh, Jack Blum! I said, huh? How do you know who I am? Everybody knows who you are! Then he proceeds to tell me all about the case that I'm involved in. And everything about things I had said and done on the island. And I thanked him for all of this information and he goes wandering off. What is this all about? Certainly a very knowledgeable drunk.

And of course going into Nevis I learned quite a bit more. There were a lot of con men and, and corporate hustlers who were working out of Nevis. And the way they operated was they had telephones, which answered in Nevis, but then forwarded the call back to the US.

Very interesting experience in terms of understanding the Caribbean, but also clearly very difficult to expect that there would be serious law enforcement. The best I could do was get

friends of mine who I had helped with anti-money laundering and drug enforcement training to call the police in St. Kitts and say keep an eye out and try to keep this guy safe, which I was very thankful for.

Naomi Fowler: The Corruption Diaries is a production of The Tax Justice Network, made by Naomi Fowler and Jo Barratt. Interviews with Jack Blum were recorded over several days at Jack's home in Maryland by Zoe Sullivan.