

SHEILA MINNIE ARONSTAM

Sheila Minnie Aronstam was born in Bloemfontein and matriculated from Eunice High School for Girls in 1945. She was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work with distinction in 1950 by the University of the Witwatersrand. She was also awarded the Max Pollak Prize for the Best Student.

After graduating she was employed by the Johannesburg Municipality where she worked as a social worker in the black community. She returned to Bloemfontein in 1952 and immediately became actively involved in caring for the blind, establishing a number of support groups including one for parents with blind children, one for people born blind and one for people who become blind in later life. She has been a Director of the Association for the Blind in the Free State since 1976.

A true philanthropist, untiring and unselfish, Sheila Aronstam has been actively involved in many welfare projects, including a children's shelter, the Place of Safety, and a child abuse clinic. She works on the Rape Crisis Committee, the Botshabelo Welfare Co-ordinating Committee and the Free State Regional Council for Welfare and is also a past Chairperson of the Bloemfontein Association of Jewish Women and serves on the United Hebrew Institution's Synagogue Committee.

During the apartheid years Sheila played a crucial role in the organisations in which she was involved. Her deep and instinctive recognition of and respect for the dignity of all people helped her guide successive generations of leaders to reach out to the disadvantaged members of our society. In those years, organisations like the National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO) had little credibility in the black community because, in order to carry out their work effectively, NICRO's leaders and social workers had to convince government officials that NICRO would not endanger the racist pillars of the apartheid state. At the same time the organisation, in order to remain relevant, had to demonstrate that it was strongly opposed to racial discrimination and oppression.

Sheila's role in that context was invaluable. Her very presence among leaders of NICRO helped it steer this difficult course. The result was that NICRO was able to maintain links between many thousands of prisoners and their families and so make possible their reintegration into society on their release. It also enabled NICRO to launch and maintain relevant community programmes in deprived black communities. How better to demonstrate the continued acceptability of NICRO than the fact that the present Minister of Education is now its National President.

Sheila married Wilfred Aronstam and they have three daughters. Notwithstanding her family commitments, she continued her academic studies at the University of the Free State. In 1968 she graduated with a Masters degree in Social Work, *cum laude*, and in 1974 she was awarded her doctorate. Sheila served on the University of the Free State Council for five years and was instrumental in conceiving and implementing the University's transformation process.

For her hard work and dedication to so many worthwhile projects, Sheila has been presented with numerous prizes and honours. Among the most prestigious was the South African Sports Association's award for her contribution to the development of sport amongst disabled people. The Rotary Club of Bloemfontein gave her its highest honorary award, the Paul Harris Award. The Free State Association for the Blind presented her with a special award for her outstanding contribution to the upliftment and support of blind people in the Free State. In 1989 Sheila was the recipient of the University of the Witwatersrand's Alumni Award and in 1999 she was named 'Bloemfonteiner of the Year'

She, more than anyone, kept the flame of Wits pride alive in the Free State through barren and sometimes hostile years. She asserted her university connection at a time when they were deeply unpopular. But her loyalty to Wits and her pride in the values it cherishes prevailed. As the country faces a new crisis in dealing with AIDS, Sheila Aronstam's work now embraces HIV/AIDS as well.

It is with great pride and pleasure that the University confers on Sheila Minnie Aronstam its highest accolade, the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.