

## LYDIA KOMAPE-NGWENYA

Lydia Komape-Ngwenya, affectionately known as 'Mam Lydia', was born in 1935 in Matlala in the Northern Province (Limpopo). She was one of seven children. Her formative years were spent on a mission farm where her family supported themselves by farming the land. In the 1950s, the community of 'mission' tenants was deprived of its ploughing land as a result of apartheid agricultural policies and the family's circumstances changed dramatically. As a result, Mam Lydia left school at the end of standard seven.

In 1966 she moved to Johannesburg where she struggled to find work, as influx control regulations denied African women freedom of movement in the cities. She was forced to accept lowly paid jobs to support herself and her three children. In 1974, moved by the plight of African workers who were denied the right to belong to trade unions, Mam Lydia joined the Metal and Allied Workers Union and began to organise in the factory in which she worked. She became known as a key recruiter and signed up 606 workers. Later she was elected shop steward and led a strike, which resulted in her dismissal.

Mam Lydia then became a full-time organiser, dedicated herself to building the independent trade union movement, and established the Transvaal branch of the Transport and General Workers Union of which she was to become Branch Secretary. She was deeply involved in the establishment of the Federation of South African Trade Unions in 1979 and the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985.

Mam Lydia not only championed women's rights in the workplace, she also challenged their subordinate status in the trade union movement, fighting for the election of more women shop stewards and organisers and for policies and programmes which recognised women's rights.

In 1985 she left the labour movement to become a full-time fieldworker for the Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC), which supported communities threatened with forced removals. She worked closely with the communities of Mogopa, Moutse, Oukasie, Mathopestad, KwaNgema and Driefontein, among others. Her support for these communities contributed to dramatic reprieves from removal and ultimately the end of the policy of forced removals.

In 1990 she founded the Rural Women's Movement (RWM) to champion the cause of rural communities fighting forced removals and farm evictions. RWM also played a significant role in empowering women to confront some of the restrictions they face within traditional rural society. When South Africa's first democratic constitution was drafted, the Rural Women's Movement contributed to ensuring that the rights of traditional leaders were subject to its gender equality clause.

In 1994 Mam Lydia was elected to Parliament, taking some of the hopes and struggles of the people with her and linking her grassroots work with her parliamentary responsibilities. People with land problems come to her from far and wide for help. She was a member of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Land Affairs and Agriculture until 1999, remains an active member of the Portfolio Committee on Water and Forestry and serves on the Status of Women Gender Committee. In

Parliament she speaks frequently on the plight of people facing rural poverty and remains an advocate for organs of civil society that she believes are the cornerstone of our democracy.

Mam Lydia has made an outstanding contribution to our society and has played a leading role in the empowerment of rural people and their struggles. Her special interest and passion has been, and remains, the plight of rural women. Not only did she play a crucial role in the difficult and uneven process of transformation on all fronts, she has become widely known and respected throughout rural communities in South Africa.

The University wishes to honour Lydia Komape-Ngwenya for the leading role she has played in advancing organisations of rural people and workers, and in promoting women's rights by conferring on her the degree of Master of Laws *honoris causa*.