

PAULINE SHEILA LIPSON

Pauline Lipson was born in Johannesburg in 1927 and attended the Johannesburg High School for Girls. In 1945, she entered into articles of clerkship with a firm of attorneys. In 1946 and 1947, while doing her articles, she studied law part-time at the University of the Witwatersrand. She completed her professional qualifications in 1950.

At the end of that year, she was approached to take over the running of the Johannesburg Legal Aid Bureau on a temporary basis until a suitable permanent director was appointed. There was no need to look any further. The Legal Aid Bureau had found its permanent director.

The Legal Aid Bureau, founded in 1937, provided legal advice to underprivileged clients and secured them representation in court long before it was fashionable to do so. Its survival through the second half of the twentieth century was entirely due to Pauline Lipson's resourcefulness and dedication, her tenaciousness and her courage.

Lipson's first child was born in June 1950, shortly before she joined the Bureau. She took maternity leave in 1953 and 1955 to have two further children but her involvement never wavered. Thanks to her stewardship the Bureau grew into one of the most significant providers of legal services to indigent South Africans and by April 1999 it was staffed by sixteen paid employees and a large number of volunteer workers.

As Director, her duties included giving legal advice and assistance in a diverse range of fields. She negotiated with employers, with other practitioners, with welfare and non-governmental organisations, and with government departments. She also became expert in training law students and provided 'in-house' tutelage to students from Wits University, the University of the North and the University of Zululand.

Her chosen career required her to have superhuman qualities – tact, persistence, a sense of humour and what can only be described as great-heartedness. She applied legendary powers of persuasion in getting legal practitioners in Johannesburg to become actively involved in the Bureau's work and in raising funds for it. These attributes have, with the passage of time, led to her becoming an icon among legal practitioners in Johannesburg. Few other lawyers are as widely known among ordinary people, or as deeply respected for their contribution to the welfare of the less privileged members of our society.

Constitutional Court President, Justice Arthur Chaskalson, has said of Lipson:

If we are to address our past in a meaningful way and transform our society into one in which the constitutional aspirations of democracy, human dignity, equality and freedom are to be realised in substance as well as form, our country needs people like Pauline Lipson who, in different fields of endeavour, are willing to commit themselves to doing what is necessary to create a fair and just society. In acknowledging Lipson's lifetime commitment to justice,

and the sacrifices she has made in pursuit of that end, Wits is identifying with and recognising the importance of such a contribution.

In a letter to the Chancellor of this University in support of the proposal that an honorary doctorate be conferred upon Pauline Lipson, former President Nelson Mandela writes as follows:

I first became aware of her work as Director of the Legal Aid Bureau during the early 1950s. At the time, and for a number of years thereafter, the Bureau was the only body to whom the indigent could turn for legal assistance. Pauline Lipson dedicated herself to the task. I still remember when the Legal Aid Bureau's offices were in the old Post Office building in Rissik Street. The 'Native' Divorce Court was also there. The offices of Mandela and Tambo were in Chancellor House opposite the Magistrate's Court – too far for me to go back during short adjournments. I availed myself of Pauline Lipson's friendship and hospitality. I went to her office to make urgent telephone calls and to have tea. The waiting room was full of men and women who had come for help. Pauline would interrupt a busy schedule of interviewing people and urging young members of the Bar and attorneys to appear on behalf of her non-paying clients. She was a persuasive lady to whom few of us could say no.

Pauline Lipson is one of the unsung heroines of the struggle for a just and equitable legal system in South Africa. She has been a champion who devoted her entire professional life to an attempt to provide indigent persons with access to justice. It is fitting that this university should pay tribute to her contribution by conferring upon her the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.