

A life of service to the community



GRAND DAME: Sylvia Lawrence, who led a remarkable and varied life of service to the community and for which she received many honours.

Death of Sylvia Lawrence in Shri Lanka

Leader Reporter
MORE than 200 people attended their quiet mass at the Durban Emmanuel Cathedral on Monday for veteran educationist, musician and community worker Sylvia Lawrence (89) who died last week in Sri Lanka.

Miss Lawrence who died while visiting her brother, Father Claude Lawrence, almost realised her dream of being present at his golden jubilee celebration of his service to the church.

The service was presided over by the former Archbishop of Durban, Dennis Hurley and attended by former colleagues from the education, social and musical fields.

Amongst those who paid tribute to her was

her nephew Harold Samuel, a lecturer at the Springfield College of Education and speakers from the Red Cross.

In an interview with *The Leader* about two months ago when she won a medal from the Red Cross for being its longest-serving member, Ms Lawrence said that it was her dream to attend her brother's celebration.

PLANNING

Ms Lawrence was in Ceylon, assisting her brother in planning the celebration when she died of a heart attack.

During her lifetime, she dedicated herself to community work and received numerous awards.

She worked with the Red Cross for more than 50 years and also with several welfare and social organisations.

She was a founding member of the Red Cross nursing division's pioneer Indian detachment and was its commandant and lecturer since 1942.

She also excelled in the field of education and music. In 1964 after retiring as principal of the HS Done Girls' School she took up a position as lecturer in music at the Springfield College of Education.

In the 1940's and 1950's she accompanied many prominent African soloists and was also the official accompanist to the Amazwi Kwasulu choir and to the African Arts Festival.

VETERAN congress and community leader, J.N. Singh paid tribute to the life and contribution of Sylvia Lawrence at the funeral mass held at the Emmanuel Cathedral, Durban on Monday 17 January 1994.

SYLVIA Lawrence, like many members of the Lawrence family, had been involved in all aspects of community activity, apart from devoted service to the Catholic Church and its upliftment projects in the educational, social and welfare fields among the needy.

Her father, Vincent Lawrence, had worked as a secretary of Mahatma Gandhi when he came to this country before the turn of this century and when Gandhi established the Natal Indian Congress to protect and advance the cause and rights of Indian South Africans.

Mr Lawrence continued his association with the Indian Congress and when he died he was a vice-president of the Progressive Natal Indian Congress under the president, Dr G. Monty Naicker.

EARLY STEPS

Mrs Lawrence, Sylvia's mother, introduced her to social and community work and Sylvia, as a young girl, accompanied her to meetings of the Durban High Women's Association founded in 1928, of which Mrs Lawrence was the first secretary.

Until recently and for many years Sylvia was the chairperson of this association, which is now known as the Durban Womens' Association.

The Lawrences sisters have made their mark as pioneers in the educational field and also in music - May and Sylvia being music teachers (piano and violin) almost to the last years of their lives.

Chrissie, Rosalind and the late Francesca, were well trained and performed music and song - the late Francesca making numerous stage appearances as a singer whose repertoire included operatic pieces.

Sylvia distinguished herself as a music teacher, particularly the piano. She taught the violin as well. My wife, Radhi, before our marriage, was her pupil; whilst a number of our nieces have sat on the piano stool beside her for their lessons.

Whilst I was at Sastri College, Sylvia was always requested to play the piano at plays performed by our dramatic society and at our social functions.

TEACHING

As a teacher she was among the first Indian women teacher and she, with Mrs Pauline Morel, started the Dartnell Crescent Girls Primary

School in 1939 and helped the six matric girls who had just passed their exams in December to learn to teach the infants without any formal teacher training.

She rose to the principalship of the CS Done School in Clairwood where she retired in 1964.

Sylvia had the energy physically and motivation to be involved in many community organisations even whilst being a full time teacher, part time music teacher and a voluntary Red Cross member - all of which she did with great intensity and success.

She was, until its dissolution a couple of years ago, the president of the National Council of Women - a non-racial women's organisation which had members from the White, African, Coloured and Indian communities in Durban.

Miss Lawrence played a leading role in the eisteddfod movement, especially the music and song sections. She also assisted the Black choir group and personally solicited funds to pay for their trips abroad.

EVICTION

In Reservoir Hills, where she lived after eviction from their Gale Street home under the Group Areas Act, she joined the ratepayers association, one of the few women members. She was, until her death, the treasurer of the organisation.

She was also a leading member and official of the Womens Cultural Circle of the area - an organisation doing welfare assistance in poorer communities in and around Durban.

Whilst not being a vocal women's liber she did much to improve the status of women in the community, by her own example of involvement even in some mainly male-orientated organisation.

She was a member and on the executive of the Indian Teachers' Society and its successors SAITA and TASA until her retirement.

She was an official and inaugural member of FORT - The Fellowship of Retired Teachers up to her untimely death. No one who knew her well, would have doubted that she would return hale and hearty from her Sri Lankan visit. But it was not to be.

Sylvia Lawrence was a remarkable woman, indeed a remarkable person.

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