

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL



Laudation

spoken by the University Orator

Professor P.J.H. SCHOLTZ, B.A. (Hons.), H.E.D. (Natal).

in presenting

MAMPHELA ALLETA RAMPHELE

to the Chancellor at the Graduation Ceremony

held in Durban

on 20th April, 1989

Mr Chancellor

If "courage" may be defined as the ability to face and endure danger or pain, then **Dr Mamphela Ramphele's** work and achievements have surely become a living example of the word. Perhaps even more remarkable has been her ability to turn personal hardship and suffering into positive action through her indomitable spirit and energy. Her courage has enabled her to transcend injustice and humiliation and to demonstrate that a creative mind is capable of freeing one from the shackles of oppression.

Mamphela Alleta Ramphele was born in Bochum, near Pietersburg, into a large and loving family. With five brothers and a sister, the house was always filled with children. Her parents were teachers and their home became the haven for the poor children in the neighbourhood. It was not surprising therefore that she was motivated to become a doctor. She graduated from the Medical School at the University of Natal in 1972, and undertook her housemanship at the King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban. After working at Mount Coke and Livingstone Hospitals she became involved in the Black Community Programmes and between 1974 and 1977 she developed the Zanempilo Community Health Centre at Zenyoka location situated outside King Williamstown.

The Centre was initially a health clinic with only one doctor, Dr Ramphele, and under her directorship it developed into a community health centre, not only involved with curative medicine but with other community activities including health education, home industries and other self-help programmes. The

growth of the centre resulted in the establishment of outlying clinics and a second medical post to handle the 50 or more patients each day who attended them.

Before 1977, Dr Ramphele was one of the vast majority of South Africans who had never heard of Lenyenye, a township in the north-eastern Transvaal, about 20 kilometres outside Tzaneen. It is a community typical of hundreds of others in resettlement areas, where poverty dominates and the problems of malnutrition and disease are endemic. She was running the Zanempilo Clinic in King Williamstown with great energy and dedication and had become deeply involved with the Black Consciousness Movement and its leader Steve Biko, whom she'd met at the University of Natal, where they had been medical students together. In April 1977 she was summarily banished and banned to Lenyenye for five years.

Dr Ramphele refused to give in to despair and turned a personal disaster into a triumph for the struggling community of Lenyenye. At the time of her arrival, she learned that the 50 000 people scattered 60 kilometres around Lenyenye had not had a medical doctor since 1963.

She established a makeshift clinic, and as her patients consisted largely of the elderly and the unemployed, she had to turn to outside sources for the necessary funds. With the assistance of an architect friend, she established a new clinic called Ithuseng which was opened in September 1981.

Ithuseng is a South Sotho word meaning "help yourselves". It's the name of Dr Ramphele's clinic and underlines its philosophy. The emphasis is on preventive medicine, literacy training programmes and self-help projects. The main thrust is to encourage the people to think of themselves as a community to bring a little hope into lives which seemed hopeless. She began teaching the people how to work together. She started a brickyard because she saw that many of the women were leaving their homes and children early in the morning to go to work for a pittance at the local brick factory. She didn't know

anything about the construction industry but that didn't deter this vital woman. Soon the brickyard, which was situated close to the township, was producing bricks for the new nursery school and for sale.

She organised a communal garden in which the women grew vegetables. She introduced a literacy training programme using the Learn and Teach method. For many of the women it meant that for the first time they were able to write to their husbands in the city. And it meant that they were able to read the prices when shopping at the local stores.

She began the equivalent of a Women's Union, which meets regularly and is run on the most democratic lines.

During this period she attempted to study for the Diploma in Tropical Medicine of the University of the Witwatersrand, but the authorities refused her permission to leave the area to undertake such studies. Not to be deterred, she undertook the studies by correspondence. She also read for a BCom degree through UNISA during this highly active period.

According to Professor Francis Wilson, director of the Southern African Labour and Research Unit at the University of Cape Town, the results of Mamphela Ramphele's work are a model for rural health development anywhere in the world. "But she has achieved even more. She is not merely patching people up. She's helping to create a community with self-respect. She is nurturing a new feeling of pride in the desolate backwoods which is Lenyenye. What makes her particularly impressive is that she combines her professionalism as a doctor, with her ability to draw on and use the resources of unskilled people."

In 1983 her name was removed from the list of banned persons.

She left Lenyenye community only when another medical doctor became available to take over her responsibilities to the community. She is now on the staff of the University of Cape Town as a Senior Research Officer in the Department of Social Anthropology, and she works in the Child Health Unit at UCT and the Child Health Clinic in Crossroads.

In recognition of her achievements for the Community of Lenyenye, she was awarded the prestigious "Woman of the Year Award" in 1983 by the Johannesburg evening newspaper "The Star", an award made by public vote of the readers of the paper.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer the degree of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*, on Mamphela Alleta Ramphele, for the distinction she has brought to this University through her contribution to the health, enrichment and wellbeing of two communities, and for her exceptional courage and integrity in face of adversity.

