Interview

A woman of substance

It was one of the shortest political speeches in history. But it catapulted Professor Frances Ames, the then-head of the Department of Neurology at UCT, into the public eye in 1977, and made her a controversial figure—loved and respected by some, hated by others.

Just after the death of the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, students held a protest meeting at UCT and invited Ames, who was outspoken about her abhorrence of the whole affair, to speak. Just before the meeting, the superintendent of Groote Schuur Hospital warned her that, as a provincial servant, she was not allowed to participate in any political activity.

Yet she went, and told the students she was forbidden to speak. Then she quoted the famous Irish politician Edmund Burke: 'For evil to succeed it is enough for good men to do nothing' and sat down. The students got up, and gave her a standing ovation.

After that she became a driving force behind the court case against the so-called 'Biko doctors', eventually forcing the hand of a most reluctant SA Medical and Dental Council to bring those doctors to book.

Sitting in her rather austere office in the spreading Valkenberg Hospital, a woman the age of Mr Nelson Mandela, she resembles a kind of wise sage. A philosopher rather than a politician, admitting to a passionate, uncompromising nature when it comes to right and wrong; yet also gifted with a healthy, humorous cynicism about human nature.

Contemplating on being a woman in a man's world, she explains how she got involved in the Biko case at a time when it was not popular or ladylike to meddle in political matters.

It was her own sense of being deprived that made her socially conscious—'but not in a party political sense.'

The young Frances Ames grew up extremely poor, with a life story reminding one of little Charlie before he became rich in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. She relates the 'total disaster' when one time she lost down the drain the shilling that she and her sister had to buy their monthly treat, a cake at the bakery.

She was born, one of three daughters, at Voortrekkerhoogte (she gives a chuckle) where her mother was a nurse. Her mother had very little schooling as she had spent the most important part of her life in a Boer concentration camp in Bloemfontein during the Second Anglo-Boer War, where their grandmother nursed the ill; there they could not attend school, as only Afrikaans-speaking children were allowed.

She never knew her father—'a real rogue.' Until she was six, she never knew quite to whom she belonged as they were taken from place to place, always being left with anyone who was prepared to take them in while her mother tried to make a living. And always surrounded by death, fever and illness.

But her sense of humour keeps shining through. 'When I was about 6, my mother remarried, a poor unfortunate Englishman, a railway clerk, and a very happy bachelor all his life. So in his forties, he discovered this struggling women and her three little girls. His tender heart was moved and he married my mother who promptly moved him from the Transvaal, away from his friends with whom he liked to have a drink, down to the Cape.'

She succeeded in getting several bursaries, and landed at UCT to study medicine, becoming the first women to complete a M.D. in neurology there. In 1961 she was appointed full-time in the Department of Neurology and in 1976 as head of the Department.

Once involved in the Biko case, and as the widow of a well-known Cape journalist, she could not let go, as the press kept on phoning her on how the case proceeded. And the story was spread that she was looking for personal publicity.

'I dreaded those calls from the press. But once seen as the spokesperson, it just went on and on. Once the medical superintendent phoned me and said I was welcome to go into private practice. My job was threatened, I had four sons. I was quite indignant when a man called me at midnight and called me a "bloody bitch" who belonged to the Black Sash. He said they all have wealthy husbands who grind the faces of the poor and push their wives into the front line.'

'It was really bitter to be disliked that much. But after a time I was getting a certain wry satisfaction out of it, because I got so contemptuous at what was going on. It hardened my resolution, which is interesting, because if you ever speak to political detainees, many said they went in still ambivalent about their political feelings, but after a period in confinement, became resolute and committed. This I experienced myself.'
The SAMDC twice declined to have disciplinary hearings against the two district surgeons. Ames and others, among them Professors Trefor Jenkins and Phillip Tobias, asked the Supreme Court for an order to review and set aside the resolution adopted by the SAMDC, and to direct the Council to appoint a Disciplinary Committee to hear the complaints against Drs Lang and Tucker.

They won the case, with costs. A Disciplinary Committee of the SAMDC heard the case and both doctors were scrapped from the role.

'At no stage did we really want to hammer the two doctors. They were in a situation where there was a lot of ambiguity. They did think the special police forces were their masters. They were really confused.'

What did this do to her life? 'I did not feel gratified by all the publicity, although we got what we wanted. It was really a matter of a period when one was virtually standing alone and asking yourself: How do I know I am right and everybody else is wrong? It must be infinite arrogance. Am I deluded, am I misled? That took its toll.

'I am not convinced that one learns anything valuable except suffering. But I was forced to do it not only by my conscience, but also by the medical students and the press. If they had not kept it alive, it would have died. Ultimately it was a group effort.'

And the effect on her children? 'Oh they did not like it at all. My third son was in the army at that time and he was my Achilles heel. I thought one way of punishing me was to send him to a nasty area. He was brainwashed about the rooi gevaar, and came in one day as I was speaking on the phone to a mother whose son had just been detained. He hit the roof.'

And as a woman, what was it like to be the first neurologist to qualify? 'We were patronised, but at that stage we still wanted male approval and we did not really assert ourselves. One quite enjoyed being “looked after”. I think many women suffer from a sort of learned helplessness, they are encouraged to think that they are frail, not good administratively, they don’t know how to handle power. We were reared in that whole culture. You want to be accepted by men, thought of as feminine, attractive.'

There was no ‘need for power’ and she was quite happy being in a lesser position. For instance, after years of teaching neurology at UCT, the head of the department died suddenly. 'I assumed because I was his right hand, they would appoint me (chuckle). What they did was to appoint somebody in private practice as a part-time temporary head. I was perfectly happy with that. When I look back and think how wicked it was! I endured that for over ten years!'

This only changed when they had to appoint a permanent head of the department. 'I suggested they should get some active, vigorous young male. But they could not because in the 1970s everybody was disappearing overseas. Then it was suggested that they appoint me in a temporary capacity as head. That suddenly aroused my anger. I said I did not want the job, I am no good administratively, but this is so humiliating: if you want me to run the department, you make it permanent. So, they were forced to do that!'

The Medical School is an ‘extremely patriarchal society, extending from British colonialists to Afrikaner, and now to Africans — perhaps the most patriarchal of the lot.'

She retired in 1985, and since then has run the EEG Unit at Valkenberg and taught neurology to registrars in psychiatry as a part-time consultant. My job here in my retirement is to remind the registrars that the brain is an organ of the mind — which they tend to forget.

'I promote the neuropsychiatry approach that the brain is an organ of the mind and that we cannot separate the biological functions from the rest. The brain is the last enigma body which has not yielded its secrets'.

Shortly after the interview, I received a note from her. It reads: 'I don’t want to give the impression that because of gender, I was oppressed. I was, but then I lent myself to it. I regret it, as it was a disservice to women. But I was too unaware for too long.'

In one respect, perhaps, but ‘unaware’, or ‘unwary’ as the poet Shelley prefers, would not be words one would use in connection with Frances Ames.

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