

Myrtle L. Aron

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Professor Myrtle Lily Aron retired this year after over thirty six years service to the profession of Speech Pathology and Audiology in South Africa.

These four decades have been some of the most exciting and influential in the history of South Africa and the development and growth of the profession during this time reflects the qualities, leadership and insight of a person particularly sensitive to the changing times and the needs of the country and its people.

She was born in 1929 on the East Rand, during the depression, and though she rarely makes reference to these difficult times, it is certain that her early childhood made her particularly sensitive to the needs of less privileged sectors of the population. She attended the University of the Witwatersrand as a student in the sub-Department of Logopedics and its Speech Voice and Hearing Clinic under Professor P de V Pienaar, obtaining her BA Logopedics in 1953.

She continued to work in this Department as an assistant supervisor until 1954 when she left for a year to work as a clinical speech therapist in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, Canada. She returned to South Africa and in 1956 embarked on her research for her Master's degree which involved an investigation of the nature and incidence of stuttering among a Bantu group of school-going children. This research, culminating in the award of a Master of Arts Cum Laude in 1959, was a seminal work in the area of stuttering and its measurement. Still frequently cited in current stuttering tests, its findings as well as its rigorous attention to methodological issues placed South Africa on the map in the field of stuttering. Her research for her doctoral degree which was awarded in 1964, was on the effects of the combination of trifluoperazine and amylobarbitone on adult stutterers. While her research and teaching activities moved to other areas after this degree, her keen interest in the area of stuttering remained and was nowhere more evident than in the organization and planning of the Department's Jubilee International Stuttering Conference held at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1986.

While undertaking her research, she was employed in the sub-Department as a clinician and assistant supervisor (1956-1958) and then as a clinical lecturer and tutor (1959-1964). In 1964 she was awarded an Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Trust award and a Fullbright Hayes Travel grant in order to study in the field of Audiology in the United States. She spent a year at the University of Pittsburg and visiting training institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom. On her return to South Africa, she developed new courses in Audiology and her influence in this aspect in the profession con-

tinued to grow and develop. She was very active in the needs of the deaf in South Africa and has written memoranda on early intervention for the infant and young hearing impaired. She was a member of the Audiological Technical Committee and steering committee on Acoustics and Noise Abatement for the South African Bureau of Standards, and a fellow of the South African Acoustics Institute.

Her Inaugural Lecture, delivered in 1974, was entitled Communication for the Hearing Impaired - Some Plain Talk, and presented some hard-hitting facts about the nature of deaf education in the country and some clear directions for its improvement.

A significant step in her career and acknowledgement of her abilities came when the sub-Department gained full status in July 1971 and became the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology. Shortly thereafter she was appointed as full Professor and Head of the Department and Director of the Speech and Hearing Clinic, a post which she held until her retirement earlier this year.

This acknowledgement of the Department's independent status more or less coincided with the move of the Department, previously housed in the library basement and then in Yale Cottage, to its present location - the Social Sciences block. Just as she was instrumental in creating the Department spiritually, it is true to say that her role in the physical development of the new Department was pivotal. She was involved in each step of its design and its construction and it has served as an impressive model for later student training facilities in this country.

Besides the many hundreds of undergraduate students who have passed through her hands and who will remember her lectures in a wide range of topics, she has been involved with the supervision of many postgraduate students. Her keen interests in research methodology, together with her experience and her insights, both academic and emotional, were highly valued by her postgraduate students.

Her involvement in the University and in broader issues related to the community has been tireless. She stood on a number of important University committees, including the Boards of the Faculties of Arts and Medicine. She resisted frequent attempts by the University to change the Faculty of affiliation, and its close and lasting relationship to the Arts Faculty has been the hallmark of the course at Wits and often the envy of other Departments both locally and internationally. This close link with the humanities and with the disciplines of Psychology and Linguistics particularly is a reflection of her attitude to life and particularly to rehabilitator

Other University committees on which she served during her career were the Higher Degrees Committee, the Human Ethics Research Committee, the Executive Committee of Convocation, and the Senate Publications Committee, as well as several scholarship awards committees.

Professor Aron's long involvement in community issues has perhaps been nowhere more evident than in her efforts through the South African Speech-Language-Hearing Association to establish the two-year Diploma course for Speech and Hearing Therapy community workers. This course, which started at Wits University in 1984, was the first of its kind in the world. Its aim was to train persons who could identify and manage the communication problems of the broader community in South Africa particularly in the rural areas. This has proven to be very successful and at least 46 Diploma graduates are now working in the field and providing a very important service to populations previously having no help. Her own research and energy in this field has done a lot to establish the groundwork for this course and has provided directions for course content, training and employment opportunities. This has included field trips to Gazankulu and the Transkei where she has examined the need for essential services set up networks and set up long-term research plans. She is also a founder member of RURACT (Rural Disability Action Group) and a member of the working group to consider an institute of urban primary health care based on the Alexandra Health Centre. She was also requested to act as chairman of a coordinating committee of senior persons from the professions of Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and Speech Therapy and Audiology to explore and establish community rehabilitation education and training of rehabilitation workers in South Africa. Her efforts in this regard have been publicized internationally and have been presented at the International Association of Logopedics and Phoniatics congresses in Tokyo (1986) and in Czechoslovakia (1989). The course has been a model, not only for other professions but also for workers in other countries.

It was also through her efforts that the Unit for Language- and Hearing-Impaired Children was established at the University. Now housed at the Transvaal Memorial Institute this facility provides facilities for a number of preschool children who require a specially integrated approach to rehabilitation. For a long time the only such Unit in the Transvaal, it has provided an exceptional training and research facility for students and become a nationally recognized facility addressing a desperate shortage in this country.

Professor Aron also instituted a long-term research programme on the development and maintenance of a computerized information retrieval programme of case data on communication disorders. This has been supported since 1975 by the Human Science Research Council and the programme has been extended to include case data on a national basis. This programme has successfully recently been transferred to the Human Sciences Research Council.

In professional issues, Professor Aron has been active throughout her career. She was a student representative of the South African Logopedic Society in 1952 and the chairman of the first national Speech Therapy congress in 1953 as well as chairman of its academic activities committee. She has had many periods of chairmanship of the S A Speech-Language-Hearing Association (formerly the S A Speech and Hearing

Association) as well as editor of its journal (S A Journal of Communication Disorders) and its monthly newsletter. She was elected as president of SASLHA in 1978. She has been regular chairman of standing committees of SASLHA to consider ethical, professional and training problems and is currently chairman of the research committee to promote and coordinate research in the field in Southern Africa. A bursary scheme administered by SASLHA was started in her name for students studying at universities in South Africa - a very fitting tribute for one who has so long been involved in student issues and concerns. She was a founder member of the Council of Allied Medical Professions and was appointed as first chairman of the Professional Board for Speech Therapy and Audiology of the South African Medical and Dental Council - a position she has held from its establishment in 1976 until the present. By request of this Board she drew up a memorandum on facilities and training for the J C de Villiers Committee of Enquiry into Further Facilities for Medical, Dental and Paramedical Training in 1984. Her international contacts have been very important for the professional in South Africa and it is undoubtedly largely due to her efforts and her representation in Washington DC in 1980, in Tokyo in 1986, at meetings of the International Association of Phoniatics and Logopedics, together with contact with the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association from international participation.

She has friends and colleagues all over the world and has lectured and travelled in Sweden, Denmark, Britain, Canada and the United States. The Department and its graduates have an international reputation and the high quality of its training is world renowned.

Myrtle Aron has been a leader in all fields of her profession. The hallmark of her contribution has been a clear and principled direction, a vision and an integrity. She has fought many battles, and has achieved widespread respect. She has done more than anyone to gain the profession its independent autonomous status. She has been an inspiration to all those she has taught and has set the highest standards for energy and dedication. Her planned activities during her retirement thankfully mean continued involvement in many aspects such as teaching and research, and it is with gratitude that those of us who have to follow still have her direction, wisdom and experience to guide us.

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