



PRESS RELEASE

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Sophia Williams De Bruyn – “I felt a lump in my throat when I looked at this large army of women — dignified women, courageous women. And in my youth, I felt so humbled to be part of such bravery.”

On Sunday, August 18 at 6.57pm on SABC3, **21 ICONS South Africa** will feature former anti-apartheid activist Sophia Williams De Bruyn, the youngest of the four female leaders who courageously led 20 000 women in a march on the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956. They were protesting against the hated, humiliating pass laws, which the apartheid regime was planning to extend to women as well. Barely 18 at the time and with scant resources to organise the massive event, Williams De Bruyn joined Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Adelaide Tambo to mobilise thousands of women to appear on the lawns of that apartheid domain to stage their protest with dignity and courage. Today, this matriarch of the fight for women’s equality is the only living member of that group of women leaders who helped to pave the way for apartheid’s demise, and every year she is reminded of what she has called the “highlight of my life” when 9 August is celebrated as Women’s Day in South Africa.

Remembering that fateful day and how the rest of her struggle unfolded, she comments in **21 ICONS South Africa**: “I think proud is an understatement. I don’t think words can express how I feel. You know, about that time and now ... I think women today, wherever they are in the highest places, the 1956 women opened a way for them ... We always hoped that things would turn out the way they turned out — for the betterment of women and of the country and of the nation.”

For the portrait, which will be published in the Sunday Times on August 18, photographer Adrian Steirn took Williams De Bruyn to kneel among the roses in the gardens of the Union Buildings in Pretoria. In her

hands she holds a Bible, which is symbolic of the marching women’s plan to kneel in prayer should officials attempt to break up the protest.

“We were really looking for a portrait that showed the absolute dignity and significance of that day,” says Steirn. “The creative idea was to create quite a sensitive portrait in that we were trying to show the strength — and dignity — in how those women behaved.”

The proceeds from the sale of the original, signed portrait will be donated to the Sophia de Bruyn and Henry Benny Nato de Bruyn Legacy Foundation, a not-for-profit philanthropic endeavour that targets the communities from which Sophia and her late husband came and where the members of their family still live.

Born in 1938, Williams De Bruyn’s entry into the anti-apartheid struggle came when, as a schoolgirl, she worked part time in a textile factory in her native Port Elizabeth. She was soon introduced to unionism when workers asked her to articulate their grievances to the bosses and she became a shop steward. She dropped out of school to work full time, became an executive member of the Textile Workers’ Union in the city and laboured alongside struggle leaders such as Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba. During this time, Williams De Bruyn was also a founder member of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (the forerunner of Cosatu) as well as an organiser for the then Coloured People Congress.

It was not the career path she had envisioned for herself, though. As she tells the **21 ICONS South Africa** team: “I always thought that I’ll go into education, into teaching, as I grew up as a child. But I also noticed around me the poverty, the poverty of our people in the community and that affected me a great deal ...”

The 1956 march, which was organised under the umbrella of the Federation of South African Women, was a turning point in Williams De Bruyn’s life. She describes it in **21 ICONS South Africa**: “They came in



a disciplined manner, courageously climbing the steps of the Union Buildings ... It was a different time to the time of today, where you kick over the rubbish bins and you smack around people and you bash their cars. Women were respectable. Women were dignified because ... they probably felt that it would've been a disgrace for them to have done anything like that."

Because they knew they would be singled out as the leaders of the march, Williams De Bruyn and her cohorts had decided that, should the police come to arrest them, everybody would gather in prayer around them, which would force the men to wade through thousands of kneeling, praying women. "Ironically, I didn't feel any fright," says Williams De Bruyn. "I think I felt more excitement, yes, I felt excited and I felt proud, and I felt very encouraged. And of course there is safety in numbers."

Years later, Williams De Bruyn would be forced into exile and finally got the opportunity to complete her education, getting a teacher's diploma in 1977. She went on to boost the capacity of ANC cadres and other freedom fighters in exile through education and training, and returned to South Africa in 1990 to assist the party as head of administration for its first legal conference inside the country. Later she would run human resources at the party's Shell House (now Luthuli House) headquarters, and in 2005 she became deputy speaker in the Gauteng Legislature before moving to the Commission for Gender Equality.

Williams De Bruyn has received several awards for meritorious service to the nation as well as the cause of women's rights and equality. They honour her devotion and loyalty in working tirelessly to establish democracy in South Africa through rendering exceptional service and setting a fine example for others to follow.

PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

Sophia Williams De Bruyn reminisces with Adrian Steirn about the great women's march to the Union Buildings in 1956 and recounts the dignity, bravery and courage of these women who changed the course of South African history.

On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

Jo-Leen Jan

Publicity

joleen@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 83 287 0165

+27 74 525 9014

Heidi Pretorius

Project Management

heidi@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 82 940 3464