

Today, 21 Icons season two features its fourth icon, Frene Ginwala, the **first female Speaker** of the National Assembly of SA



COLLECTABLE Frene Ginwala poses for the 21 Icon project

PHOTOS: GARY VAN WYK

BEHIND THE ICON
COLLECT THE POSTER

The *speaker* of truth to power

Frene Ginwala's portrait depicts a formidable woman standing in front of a sign pointing in a number of directions. Some arrows show the way to the various countries Ginwala helped heroes of the struggle escape to during apartheid; others are emblazoned with names of the values - democracy, independence, togetherness, forgiveness - she embodies as one of the most innovative and pioneering representatives of democracy in South Africa.

As befits someone with a custom of speaking out - be it against gender inequality or discrimination - and someone whose voice was a key feature of our first democratic Parliament, she is pictured holding a megaphone.

Given her upbringing, Ginwala's entry into politics was almost inevitable. She says her political consciousness was created by her parents, who were always reminding her and her sister that they were privileged.

"I grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, when the congress movement was at its height, whether it was the Indian Congress or the ANC. It was a movement that emphasised the importance of reporting back to the population, so it was all about mass rallies and meetings. Even as kids, we all wanted to go to the rallies so we got involved gradually."

But it wasn't simply the widespread popularity of these movements that nudged Ginwala into activism - even as a child, she had a keen awareness of the divisions created by apartheid.

One of her earliest memories is that she wasn't able to use the playground equipment like other children because she was Indian. She recalls another time when, at the age of 10, she was asked to pen a letter for the household's 30-year-old helper, giving him permission to walk without a pass.

By the time Ginwala went to study law overseas, she was an active member in the Indian Congress, which by then had joined forces with the ANC. Her involvement with the latter increased when, after her return

from studying, she was approached by Walter Sisulu to set up an external mission, a process that gained momentum after the Sharpeville massacre and subsequent banning of the ANC. Ginwala admits she didn't know how to help exiles get into other countries, but she did have a particularly valuable resource: a passport.

The first person she helped move out of South Africa was Oliver Tambo, getting him to Tanganyika and from there to London - and, ultimately, the UN. With all the logistics involved, her job, she says, was akin to that of a travel agent: collecting travel papers for exiles, then meeting them in Tanganyika.

This lasted for three years until an accident necessitated a move to London for medical treatment. There, Ginwala's journalistic career flourished and she contributed to a number of prominent British publications.

Eventually, the day came when the ANC was unbanned and exiles were welcomed home. Ginwala says she never doubted that day would come: "I always believed we would [succeed]. Otherwise we wouldn't have continued."

With her return to South Africa came a new position within the ANC: although she had planned to set up the organisation's research department, Nelson Mandela told her he wanted her to be parliamentary speaker. Ginwala reveals she had wanted to turn down her nomination but with the entire leadership backing Mandela's proposal, she felt there was no point in saying no.

Looking back, she is able to see the mark she left on her country. "I believed I strengthened and transformed Parliament, which is what we needed to do. We started the [first democratic] Parliament with a blank sheet; there were no traditions and no precedents as far as the ANC was concerned. If you don't have democracy, you don't have a parliament."

The parliament that was created was, in accordance with the ANC's wishes and ideals, one of negotiation and representation.

And what about Parliament today? Ginwala acknowledges the challenges but says we need to be aware that the direness of our circumstances means our solutions have had to work especially hard.

She believes these can be overcome with good leadership and input from all members of society. "We need a South Africa in which the population as a whole - men, women, poor, rich - has a say, knowing their views are taken into account."

● Watch The Frene Ginwala documentary on SABC3 at 8.27pm tonight

● For more information, visit 21icons.com

● Download Zappar from your app store, zap the icon and watch the trailer

THE SPEAKER



Frene Ginwala jokes that her role during the struggle was akin to that of a travel agent: collecting travel papers for exiles, then meeting them in Tanganyika

