

FELICIA KENTRIDGE

7 August 1930 – 7 June 2015



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LRC

Legal Resources Centre





ABOUT FELICIA

Felicia Kentridge was born on the 7th of August 1930 in Johannesburg. Her parents, Max and Irene Geffen, were both lawyers (her mother was the first woman to be called to the Bar in South Africa).

Felicia obtained a BA at the University of Cape Town in 1949, followed by an LLB at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). She married Sydney Kentridge on 15th January 1952, and was called to the Bar the following year.

Felicia practised as an advocate in Johannesburg for close to 20 years before joining the Law Faculty at Wits where she pioneered the teaching and practice of applied legal studies. Felicia was instrumental in establishing the Wits Law Clinic where students, under supervision, provide legal advice and assistance to people who cannot otherwise afford legal representation. In the process, the students gain first-hand experience in the application of the law.

Felicia was vigorous, energetic, high spirited, gregarious and generous. She had a probing and questioning mind, and she was a scourge to those who abused power. She was an innovator and an early adopter of new ideas and new technologies. She was also a fine artist with a brilliant eye for design. In 1990, Haverford College in the USA awarded her an Honorary Doctorate in Laws (LLD) and the South African General Council of the Bar has honoured both Felicia and Sydney with the establishment of the annual Sydney and Felicia Kentridge Award for services to the law in South Africa.

FELICIA'S TIME WITH THE LEGAL RESOURCES CENTRE (LRC)

In 1979, Felicia helped to establish the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) in Johannesburg, together with Arthur Chaskalson, a Senior Counsel at the Johannesburg Bar who went on to become the first President of the Constitutional Court of South Africa and Geoff Budlender, then an attorney.

The LRC pursued the strategy of formulating and fighting test cases which challenged the legality of certain administrative practices as being beyond even the wide-ranging powers of the apartheid statutes. Two significant victories of this approach were displayed in the Komani and Rikhoto cases, which held that certain regulations that drastically limited the rights of black South Africans to live in urban areas, were unlawful. These victories weakened a key apartheid law, the Urban Areas Act, and dramatically undermined influx control, a keystone of apartheid policy.

In a letter to Sydney Kentridge, Geoff Budlender, a former National Director of the LRC, and an outstanding advocate who worked on many cases with Felicia, recollected a conversation with her *"in which she said that she thought that the long-term value of the LRC would be in building respect for the rule of law. At the time I thought that was rather conservative; now I think it was prescient."*

In the mid-1980s, Felicia moved to London with Sydney, but retained her connection with the LRC in the capacity of Chairperson of its governing body, the Legal Resources Trust. She was also the guiding hand behind the establishment of two

major funding bodies to support the LRC: the Legal Assistance Trust (now part of the Canon Collins Educational and Legal Assistance Trust) in the UK, and the Southern African Legal Services and Legal Education Project in the USA.

MEMORIAL SERVICE IN HER HONOUR

Felicia died in London on the 7th of June 2015 after a long illness. Her family was around her and the sun was shining into her room. The garden outside was in full leaf and vibrant with life. She lives on in the love and memories of her friends and in the hearts of Sydney, her four children, Catherine, William, Eliza and Matthew, her nine grandchildren and her great-grandson.

On the 16 July 2015, at the Wits University School of Law, friends, family, acquaintances, former colleagues, staff and trustees of the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) and members of the legal community came together to remember Lady Felicia Kentridge.

PEOPLE CLOSE TO HER GAVE MOVING TRIBUTES TO HER LIFE:

Geoff Budlender, one of the founding members of the Legal Resources Centre, spoke of the early days when Felicia used her creativity, foresight and compassion to establish the proud institution of the LRC in 1979. "It's not an accident that the LRC was Felicia's idea, she was a very creative person." Geoff remembers Felicia as a person who "..... cared deeply about people. She wasn't a person of ideological commitment. She was a person committed to people and to fairness and to justice."

Judge Mahomed Navsa, who worked as a young lawyer at the LRC when Felicia was still actively involved in the organisation said he respected Felicia for her contribution to his own growth as a lawyer, and her commitment to the success of the LRC. "She was willing me to succeed; she wanted me to succeed, because she wanted the LRC to succeed." He also described her great beauty; "If I would describe Felicia in one word it would be 'elegant'." "Felicia held us [early LRC] together. She was a presence, you couldn't ignore her." "Once, twice, three times a lady."

Thandi Orleyn, who was also a young lawyer at the time Felicia was active in the LRC, spoke of how Felicia served as an example and an inspiration to young female lawyers in the 80s because of her strength, intellectual capacity and her ability to handle all her positions [wife, mother, advocate] "like a duck in water." Thandi serves as Chairperson of the Legal Resources Trust (LRC). She spoke passionately of how Felicia was influential in donor circles and how she kept the LRC afloat during difficult times. Thandi also reiterated the legacy that Felicia has left behind of two very important organisations, the Legal Resources Centre and the Wits Law Clinic. She was an exemplary lawyer and activist.

Ivor Schwartzman has been friends with Felicia for 65 years, and was able to lend detail to her years as a young student. He spoke of her intelligence and sterling attributes. She gave up her full-time practice as an advocate in order to "participate in the law in a different way and, at the same time make a meaningful contribution to the society in which she



lived.” She opened the Wits Law Clinic which provides two vital services: practical experience for students and their subsequent exposure to the unjustness and unfairness in society, but also access to legal services for thousands of poor people.

William Kentridge, Felicia’s son, spoke of the fire that drove her – an “anger and outrage” at what was happening in South Africa in terms of the law. “One should never trust men with white hair and no wrinkles... it showed they had no conscience” was something she would say about various judges she encountered. She was also driven by experiences of the struggle of being both a mother and an advocate – leading her to her “two great projects”, which allowed her to work on her own terms; teaching at the Law School at Wits and her conception and establishment of the LRC.

William also spoke of her hard working spirit and mentioned her idiom; “One should always get ones hands dirty once a day.” He spoke too of her later life, after leaving South Africa. With much sadness, he described her last days before taking her final breath.

Matthew Kentridge, her second son, gave a very visual and personal account of Felicia as a mother and a moving account of her humanity. He spoke of the largeness of her embrace of her children and grandchildren, her love of art and music, and allowed us a glimpse into his memories of watching her work on her paintings while listening to classical music. Felicia was a beautiful, graceful woman, but also carried a lightness about her. She encouraged Matthew to reach great heights in his writing. “Her generosity of spirit was the greatest gift she gave to us all.”

Eliza Kentridge, Felicia’s daughter shared two moving poems she wrote to juxtapose the vibrant, spirited earlier life of her mother with the stillness caused by her illness in the last few years of her life.

Sydney Kentridge, her husband closed the tributes by speaking of Felicia’s commitment to justice, ideals and principles which drove her and how she was able to translate them into practical reality. She started a movement of legal activism. He quoted Shakespeare’s Hamlet in reference to her death, indicating his acceptance: “If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come.”



Sydney closed the ceremony by saying *“It is not a mere cliché, but it is a great comfort to us that people have remembered her, and remembered her so warmly.”*

“Felicia embodied all that is aspirational about the power of the law to change individual lives and societies. At the LRC she brought a level of energy and flair that saw her providing legal assistance to clients who came into the office, appearing in court on their behalf, raising funds, running training programmes and dealing with a range of organisational challenges. Her involvement in cases laid the foundation for over three decades of litigation that have set many significant precedents and have literally changed the lives of hundreds of thousands and brought really concrete, positive results for so many since.

The ongoing work of the LRC is a testament to the resilience of her vision to use the law to advance human rights for all.

Felicia leaves a tremendous legacy: a life that was committed to promoting equality and justice and that will live on through the work of the LRC.”

Janet Love, National Director of the LRC