

Rural Rehabilitation SA (RuReSA) presented a Lifetime Achievement Award (courtesy of Discovery Health) to Dr Pam McLaren, an occupational therapist who pioneered rural rehabilitation services. She is described by colleagues as having a “brave and daring heart” for stepping out of the boundaries of the city and taking rehabilitation to the people who need it most and had the least access to health care services.



In the early 70's she was based in Oshakati General Hospital, Namibia, working with amputees from the war in Angola - who walked using “tree stumps’ as legs to get to Oshakati where they could be fitted for a prosthesis. Later at Manguzi Methodist Hospital, near Kosi Bay, she started an income-generating project using indigenous knowledge of basketry, woodwork and plants; so that mothers and grannies with children in the malnutrition ward could buy peanuts for the peanut porridge promoted by the Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit. Little did she know that her post was funded by 2 doctors out of their own pocket for the 1st year!

Pam became more aware and more concerned with the social injustices faced by people during her research for her Masters in Soweto (1975-78) when she tried to rehabilitate the people who had been thrown off trains by ‘tsotsis’ and who were subsequently called ‘disabled’; and then by her work at Manguzi - a ‘deep rural’, very remote area in the grips of



poverty and malnutrition. A whole year after arriving at Manguzi she had access to a Land Rover from The TEAR FUND and was able to travel into the sand forest and the palm veldt and discovered literally hundreds of people, with many different conditions, unable to travel to hospital. Later she did her PhD here on Mseleni Joint Disease.

Pam was a co-founder of the Rural Disability Action Group (RURACT) in 1986, an organisation that aimed to bring isolated rural based therapists and rehabilitation workers together in the days before the magic of email and internet; and RuReSA (in 2011) a modern version of RURACT. She has also contributed widely to DART (the Disability Action Research Team) from 1995, and developed a statistics bank for rural rehabilitation and disability, at a time when rehabilitation statistics were non - existent! Pam was the catalyst for therapists to move out of the cities and into rural areas, her awareness of social injustice and her determination to change the lives of those affected by social injustice helped create the community rehabilitation service in South Africa today, and influence the policy of the KZN rehabilitation service, and most recently the national policy regarding rehabilitation through her work on the national Framework and Strategic Plan for Disability and Rehabilitation for 2015.

In 1983 Pam McLaren received the “Wheel of Service” from the Rotary Club of North Durban, for distinguished contribution to better human relations; and in 1992 the Bronze Medal by Community Health Association of Southern Africa (CHASA) for contribution toward the knowledge of disabled people in rural areas.

Pam remains enthusiastic about the future of community based rehabilitation, and the new generation of therapists following in her footsteps, as well as recognising the influence of all those she worked with: “I look back at all the photographs of individuals who gave me the strength and determination to face the “rapids” (on my journey) I realise how much I learnt from their humanity and wisdom. The simple interventions, I was able to offer, as the only therapist in that huge area, were so appreciated, nothing being taken for granted.”

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