

Allyson Lawless a woman for our times



► The finalists in the science and technology category: Allyson Lawless, Linda Richter and Sue Milton

ALLYSON LAWLESS, SAICE'S first woman president, has been announced the winner in the 2007 science and technology category of the prestigious Shoprite Checkers/SABC2 Woman of the Year Award.

When she was appointed to this position in 2000, she became the first woman in the then almost 100 year history of the organisation and it has since been her drive to make a difference from the highest levels in government to communities in need of infrastructure.

Allyson accepted her award at a dazzling gala event to celebrate women in South Africa, held in Cape Town on 26 July 2007, saying that she was absolutely overjoyed!

'Whilst technology is an indispensable tool to development, this award recognises that technology requires skilled people for implementation. Without practical strategies to harness the whole skills spectrum from novice to expert and ensure that skills are transferred systematically, the progress technology gives us will not be harnessed, and we will not move forward as a country.'

'Community involvement is a major factor in sustainability as it ensures that the technological solutions are friendly and jobs are created. Having worked so passionately on skills development in civil engineering, I hope that the career development models that we have proved to be successful and the lessons learnt in implementing service delivery will be expanded and adopted as the

national model in South Africa and in other developing countries,' she concluded.

Allyson has been addressing imbalances in the civil engineering profession and in 2005 published the book *Numbers and Needs*, which has become a national reference guide on skills development – suggesting a range of solutions almost from cradle to grave! She has actively campaigned to put senior and junior engineers back into local government to improve service delivery.

As a civil engineer exposed to the realities of South Africa Allyson has made a real connection between civil engineering and the people that she serves. She works hard to bridge the challenges presented by existing gaps.

After obtaining a BSc (Civil Engineering) and an MSc (Structural Engineering) she worked as a civil engineer in Windhoek, Johannesburg and in the United Kingdom before starting her own company, which pioneered the development of affordable, desktop civil engineering software to address civil and structural analysis, design, detailing, CAD, GIS, and administration needs in the range of engineering disciplines.

One of the company's important contributions to development was to offer free or substantially subsidised training to almost 200 previously disadvantaged students and graduates in order to im-

prove their employment opportunities. Some are now in senior public sector positions.

In 2001 she sold Allyson Lawless (Pty) Ltd to AST, one of the largest listed IT companies, to integrate the Allyson Lawless business into the corporate structure which she joined as a director.

Allyson was instrumental in launching the Local Government Engineering Empowerment Programme, which was supported by SA Local Government Association (Salga), Eskom, the Department of Local Government, the Department of Housing, the CSIR and DACST, to orientate new councilors on the intricacies of infrastructure delivery and guide them on issues to consider when making decisions.

Along with Dawie Botha, executive director of SAICE, she was also instrumental in establishing the Africa Engineers Forum (AEF), which is mainly aimed at sharing technology and harmonising codes of practice throughout Africa.

Having identified major skills gaps in local government, Allyson conceived, developed and now manages a major government intervention to re-introduce retired engineering professionals into local government (ENERGY). They are teamed with students requiring experiential training and graduates who cannot find work. Together they are delivering services to several million people.

Allyson contributed to the development of the Jipsa (a national joint initiative on priority skills acquisition) proposals to increase the number of engineers graduating through South African universities and to re-introduce structured training for graduates in the workplace. She carried out artisan research in local government to contribute to the Jipsa artisan development proposals.

She is highly regarded and respected in the civil engineering profession and industry and is making an immense difference to the progress of students and graduates and the lives of ordinary people, young and old, through her facilitation and negotiation with influential decisions-makers.

In spite of being advised in high school to stay away from engineering and rather teach or nurse, she followed her heart and stuck to her decision to become one of the few female civil engineers at the time in a male-dominated industry.

The other two finalists in the category were Professor Linda Richter – one of the world's foremost child and family policy researchers, who has made a tireless contribution to research, policy and practice to improve the wellbeing of children, youth and families in South Africa – and Professor Sue Milton – outstanding researcher, teacher and outreach contributor over many years in the field of science and technology, which has for long been a male-dominated field. ■

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