

A woman of substance

ON WEDNESDAY 18 MARCH this year the University of Stellenbosch conferred an honorary doctorate on Allyson Lawless, who was SAICE's first lady president in 2000, and who still serves on SAICE's Council.

This pioneering lady engineer received the degree Doctor in Engineering (DEng), *honoris causa*, for her excellence as a civil engineer and scientist, leadership as a businesswoman and being a role model for young people from all backgrounds.

Allyson Lawless qualified from the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal) as a civil engineer at a time when there were only a handful of female engineers in South Africa. She then went on to complete an MSc in Structural Engineering at the Imperial College in London.

After her registration as a Professional Engineer in South Africa in 1978, Allyson became a Chartered Engineer of the Engineering Council of the United Kingdom. She was only the second woman to become a Fellow of the South African Institution of Civil Engineering and the third to become a Fellow of the Institution of Structural Engineers (IStructE) in London, and of the South African Academy of Engineering (SAAE). She also served on the Executive Committee of SAAE from 2004 to 2006. Allyson has filled leadership roles in these organisations and was the International Vice-President of IStructE in 1997/1998 – the first woman to hold this position.

In addition, Allyson serves on the council of the University of Venda, and the JIPSA Technical Panel. The Deputy-President has also appointed her as an Energy Champion.

In the 1980s, her first company, Allyson Lawless (Pty) Ltd, was at the cutting edge of the development of affordable



spreadsheet software for civil engineering. She has always had a lively interest in the technical skills of engineers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. After identifying large-scale skills gaps in local government, she devised a government intervention under the banner of SAICE by which retired professional engineers are reappointed in the service of local governments. Here they support (primarily black) students who need practical training or graduates who cannot find work.

After extensive research, Allyson published two books on skills development: *Numbers and Needs*, and *Numbers and Needs in Local Government*. In the latter she provides a turnaround strategy for service delivery in local government, which could change the face of this crucial sector. The findings resulted in the launching of major national initiatives, including increased funding to tertiary engineering departments.

1 Allyson Lawless with Professor Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor (left) and Dr Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, Chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch. Allyson was one of only two people on whom an honorary doctorate was conferred by the University of Stellenbosch on 18 March 2009

Allyson has received a number of awards, among others being the 2007 winner of the Shoprite-Checkers/SABC2 Woman of the Year in the category Science and Technology, as well as being the winner of the prestigious National Science and Technology Forum category for an individual for her outstanding research in science, engineering and technology in South Africa.

All this and much more Allyson Lawless has achieved while raising two children!

► INFO

Marie Ashpole
Outreach Officer: SAICE
mashpole@saice.org.za