

OBITUARY: Joy Roberts, tireless human rights campaigner

TRISH BEAVER

JOY Roberts (85), a former chair of the Edendale Welfare Society, died on Christmas Day.

Roberts personified the spirit of volunteerism, having worked full-time and without pay for the society more than 40 years.

She was also a former chair of the Midlands Black Sash.

Her son, Jonathan Hey, said: "She touched so many lives during her life and never with huge fuss or drama, always gave with quiet dignity and service."

He described his mother as a woman who lived by the motto: "Always rise above the occasion."

Roberts (nee Hendry) was born in Durban in 1926 and married her first husband Peter Hey at the age of 22. After their marriage they went to Cambridge University. Roberts had studied social work at Natal University and did her honours in psychology.

The young couple went to London and New York and spent a year in New Zealand before returning to South Africa where her husband accepted a post at the university in Pietermaritzburg.

Roberts developed an increasing political awareness. Her husband had started a theatre production company, the Phoenix Productions, and they put on shows that were open to audiences of all races.

This meant that venues were restricted to university halls or community organisa-



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Joy Roberts, a tireless campaigner for human rights

tions like the old Lotus Hall at the bottom of East Street. In 1961 they put on the first mixed-race play to a mixed-race audience.

Roberts joined the Black Sash in 1962 and became chair of the Edendale Welfare Society in 1967.

In an interview with the Alan Paton Oral

History Project last year Roberts discussed her involvement in the Black Sash.

"I was involved in Edendale Welfare and I used to have arguments with some people who thought it was wrong to do the government's business for them. 'You shouldn't be involved in welfare. Just let them sink', they said. 'It's the state's responsibility. You are doing their job for them.'

"Well," said Roberts, "that was hard, because you couldn't turn your back on the children. I couldn't, anyway.

"You could do battle in small ways — things like grants, which, at that stage, were very much geared to white grants being higher than Indian grants, and 'coloured' grants, and black grants were very small.

"So you could put in your word of protest there."

Her first husband died in 1962 after a long illness, and in 1967 she married Simon Roberts, a prominent lawyer.

While he battled on the legal front, she did her bit in the trenches.

Roberts's commitment was recognised by the city in 2005 when she was presented with a Certificate of Appreciation by former president Nelson Mandela.

But instead of putting the photograph of herself and Mandela in a place of prominence, Jonathan said, his mother put the photograph quietly behind the door, not wanting to draw attention to it.

Roberts will be remembered as a humanitarian who made a big difference to many

people's lives in her quiet way.

She leaves behind her son Jonathan, daughter Jean and step-children, Guy, Stephanie and Nicola.

A memorial service will be held for her today at 10.30 at the Church of the Ascension in Hilton.

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