

Eugenia Mbekeni honoured for lifelong dedication to women's empowerment

A pioneer in youth development, an unwavering advocate for women's empowerment, and a leader in community transformation, Eugenia Mbekeni has dedicated her life to shaping the future of young women in South Africa. It is in recognition of this extraordinary contribution that Rhodes University will bestow upon her the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws (LLD) (*honoris causa*).

Born in 1939 in Mount Frere, Eastern Cape, Mrs Mbekeni grew up in a religious and disciplined household, the eldest of nine siblings. Her natural leadership abilities emerged early in her schooling, where she served as Head Prefect at both Osborne Secondary School and Adams College in Amanzimtoti. Committed to education, she earned her Teacher's Diploma from Healdtown Training College in Fort Beaufort, before embarking on a teaching career at Mount Arthur Training College in Lady Frere.

Although she began in education, her vision extended beyond the classroom. She took on the challenge of managing her family's business in Tsolo from 1966 to 1992, proving herself as a skilled entrepreneur and financial manager. Alongside running the business, she established a successful farming initiative, specialising in egg production, dairy farming, and vegetable cultivation. This project became a model for local economic development and inspired many community members to start their own agricultural ventures. Her deep understanding of financial management later became invaluable in her leadership within Girl Guides South Africa.

Mrs Mbekeni's passion for women's leadership and youth development led her to found the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Tsolo in 1985, a platform that empowered young women and provided opportunities for leadership and advocacy. This was just the beginning of her influence in shaping youth-focused organisations in South Africa.

Her leadership in the Girl Guides Association of South Africa (GGASA) Movement saw her rise through the ranks to play a pivotal role in the organisation's transformation. She was appointed to the Girl Guides Council for the Transkei Region in 1985 and, a year later, elected Regional Commissioner. Recognised for her strategic leadership and governance skills, she joined the National Executive Committee (NATEX) in 1988 and later became Deputy Chief Commissioner in 1998, overseeing the movement's financial matters.

In 2002, she became Chief Commissioner, a position that placed her at the helm of the national organisation during a critical period of transformation. Under her leadership, GGASA embraced inclusivity and modernised its structure, ensuring that it continued to serve as a vital movement for empowering young girls across South Africa. She went on to serve as National President, further strengthening the organisation's role in youth development and gender equality.

Beyond her national contributions, Mrs Mbekeni has played a crucial role in expanding women's leadership across Africa. She was instrumental in supporting six African nations—Namibia, Botswana, Malawi, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho—to achieve full membership in the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS).

Her impact was not limited to Africa. She represented South Africa at international conferences in Singapore, Hong Kong, China, the Ivory Coast, Ireland, and the Philippines, advocating for greater opportunities for African women in leadership. She was also a key participant in a South African national conference on racism, Combating Racism – A Nation in Dialogue, in 2000.

In addition to her work in youth organisations, she contributed to governmental initiatives. She was appointed to the Presidential Working Committee on Women's Issues, where she focused on water and sanitation challenges affecting rural communities. Her ability to navigate both grassroots activism and high-level policy discussions cemented her reputation as a visionary leader in women's development.

Her unwavering dedication has been recognised through multiple prestigious awards. She has received the Silver Merit Award and the Gold Award from GGASA, the Achievers Award from the Eastern Cape Department of Sports, Arts & Culture, and the Silver Fish Award, the highest honour awarded by GGASA. These accolades reflect the lasting influence she has had on youth empowerment and women's leadership.

Her contributions to the Girl Guides Movement have led to her being named a Life Honorary Member of both GGASA and WAGGGS, a distinction reserved for those who have made an outstanding impact on the global scouting and guiding community. Despite her extensive public commitments, she remains dedicated to family and mentorship, values she has instilled in her three accomplished children: Dr Pampata Mbekeni, a medical doctor in Gauteng; Mandiza Mbekeni, a lawyer; and Dr Charles Mbekeni, also a medical doctor in Gauteng.

On 4 April 2025, at 14:30, Rhodes University will celebrate Mrs Mbekeni's exceptional contributions to leadership, education, and social development by awarding her an Honorary Doctorate of Laws. As part of the ceremony, she will deliver an address to graduates, sharing insights from her decades of leadership and advocacy.