

HONORARY GRADUATE

MERCY ELIZABETH MAKHALEMELE

Mercy Elizabeth Makhalemele is not yet thirty but she has already attained a fine reputation both locally and internationally. Her stature derives not merely from her life experiences as a woman in Africa living with HIV but from the way in which she has translated that experience into positive action against the disease and its effects.

Mercy Makhalemele was born in Soweto in 1970, one of two children of the well known musician, Mike Makhalemele. She was educated at Anchor High School in Mzimhlophe, where she matriculated. She married her husband by traditional rites and the first child of their union, a son, Thabang, was born in 1989. A second child, Victoria, followed in 1993.

While pregnant with Victoria, Mercy underwent a voluntary test for HIV at Baragwanath Hospital and was diagnosed as HIV positive. The diagnosis was to change the quality of her life dramatically and irrevocably.

On hearing the news, her husband assaulted her physically - she bears the marks of that assault today - and forced her to leave their home. She was dismissed from her job and her newborn baby was diagnosed as carrying the virus. Victoria died of AIDS in 1995.

Makhalemele sought help from the AIDS Consortium - a national network of non-governmental organisations established in 1992 within the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) at Wits. There she received advice, support and part-time employment. She committed herself to propagating the Charter of Rights on AIDS/HIV drafted by the Consortium and her early efforts to make the existence of the Charter known amongst AIDS and other organisations contributed to its stature world wide as a bench-mark of AIDS advocacy.

The AIDS Consortium post led to employment opportunities for Makhalemele first as a programme coordinator with the Society for AIDS Families and Orphans (SAFO) at Baragwanath Hospital, then in the Department of Health, as a temporary Gender and Community Liaison Officer in the AIDS Unit, and eventually as the KwaZulu co-ordinator of the National Association of People Living with AIDS and HIV (NAPWA).

But the greatest impact Makhalemele has made has been in her broader public role as an organiser, public speaker, lobbyist, advocate, trainer and counsellor. In these capacities she has served as an inspiration to many thousands of people affected by AIDS and HIV, not only in South Africa but

throughout the world. She has spoken in countless workplaces and has done presentations for major corporations.

For tens of thousands of people Makhalemele has become the voice and the living face of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. At a time when South Africans are still reluctant to believe that AIDS is real, she has spoken out - addressing, educating and counselling.

Her first public address was from a Wits platform in June 1992, when CALS and the AIDS Consortium hosted the first National Conference on Legal Rights and AIDS. She has gone on to speak from many major public platforms in Africa, the United States and Europe. Her most trying (and successful) appearance was her address to the opening Plenary Session of the XIIth International Conference on AIDS in Geneva where she indelibly impressed more than ten thousand delegates with her plea for compassion and common sense.

Mercy Makhalemele has also made an important contribution to national policy formulation on AIDS and HIV. Since 1996 she has been a member of the South African Law Commission's Project Committee on AIDS and HIV. This Committee has already delivered a number of influential reports on legislative and policy reform, including a recommendation that pre-employment testing for HIV be prohibited. A clause to that effect is included in the Employment Equity Act of 1998. In March 1998, she founded the National Women's Alive AIDS Network.

In awarding Mercy Makhalemele an Honorary Master's degree the University gives effect to the recently expanded criteria for the award of such degrees. The degree is also awarded in the hope that it will help its recipient to expand or more effectively perform in the future the work for which she has already been recognised.

The University acknowledges, too, the signal role played by individuals and associations attached to Wits in giving leadership on policy and approaches and interventions in the epidemic. These include the AIDS Law project in CALS and the AIDS Consortium, which, until recently, was University-based; the Perinatal HIV Unit; the Centre for Health Policy; the Women's Health Project; the Sexually Transmitted Diseases Unit and its clinics and the hundreds of faculty health care workers who treat patients - fifty per cent of whom are HIV positive - in our teaching hospitals every day.

By facing the seemingly insuperable challenges which have confronted her, Makhalemele has given many thousands of women hope. In this she represents the face of Africa itself - a woman in adversity who has fought against illness and disadvantage, and who has done so with dignity and courage and success. It is with great pride and pleasure that the University confers upon Mercy Elizabeth Makhalemele the degree of Master of Arts *honoris causa*.