

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Shortlisted for position of Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Universities of South Africa (1999), Port Elizabeth (2001) and Potchefstroom (2001)
- Elected Member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) (2001)
- Elected Chairperson of the Academic and Professional Staff Association and Deputy Chairperson of the Women's Forum at the University of South Africa (1996)

## DEFINING MOMENT

She initially wanted to go into law practice but the allure of academia captured her when she was exposed to the life of research and teaching at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in the 1970s.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

"I love the music of the 1960s and rock music, and if I could have chosen otherwise, I would love to have been a singer. It is a secret desire of mine, but I have no talent for it!"

## CHAMPION OF ACADEMIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

*"I was drawn to law because of my sense that there is a lot of unfairness in society."*

Annél van Aswegen is a distinguished academic lawyer who has had many roles in her life and career, all based on addressing the injustices of society and the workplace. "I have always thought that law and education are two of the most powerful tools with which one can ensure justice and fairness towards all." She explains: "What I found particularly rewarding in my working life is the interaction I had with students. I liked the role I could play in developing especially those who had had a difficult route towards studying and getting their degrees. That is why I decided all those years ago not to leave the teaching profession for the more lucrative legal profession."

Van Aswegen has had many highlights in her career, among them her memories of former President Nelson Mandela: "At one time one of my students was Nelson Mandela, still in prison and taking some legal subjects at Unisa,

one of which I taught," she remembers fondly. "After he was released, I was one of the three people at Unisa who nominated and motivated for his honorary doctorate at Unisa, which was the first one he got from a South African university," she says. "He was such a wonderful role model for all of our students, all of whom were studying under difficult circumstances."

In her early years, while she was still intending to practice law, circumstances conspired to steer her in a different direction, one that would shape the rest of her life and career. "Many years ago there was still some bias against women in legal practice," she says. She had intended completing her articles after getting her law degree, "but some firms at the time were loath to appoint women, especially if they were married and had or intended to have children.

"Since I had got married immediately after completing my LLB degree, I decided to rather remain at Unisa, where I had started my career as a junior lecturer while studying for my LLB." She found academia rewarding because of its educational aspects, and she chose to continue with it as her career.

As a legal academic, her research interests ranged from the law of contract, delict, damages and family law to human rights and women's rights. She published more than 30 articles in accredited journals and several chapters in books. She regularly used her skills as a lawyer to give talks to women's groups on family law issues, to give interviews on radio and television, and to participate in research projects for the South African Law Commission.

## NEW CONSTITUTION ON HORIZON

As her academic career progressed, she chose to focus on overlapping areas of law in her research, doing extensive work on the concurrence of claims in contract and delict. This brought her to that stage in South Africa's history when a new constitution was on the horizon. "My research then looked into how the constitution would influence the practice of private law," she explains.

She chose to fight against the many injustices she saw by getting involved in institutions such as the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria (UP)



when it was in its infancy in the late 1980s. She also became a member of Lawyers for Human Rights and was Deputy Chair of the Pretoria Branch from 1995 to 1997.

In her time in academia she felt increasingly that university management in the country was not very academic-friendly as it had become bureaucratic and she sought ways to mitigate the problem. "I have always thought that one of the ways of correcting the bias that any big bureaucratic institution will have is by getting people who know the business – academics – to be managers in universities and not only researchers and teachers." After serving as Head of Department of Private Law at Unisa for three years, in 1998 she became Acting Registrar of Professional Services and a member of the executive of Unisa for three years. "I've often wondered how wise a decision that was because it again took me on a path I had not foreseen, since I left my academic career before establishing myself internationally," she says. "But ultimately I have no regrets."

In 2003, she left Unisa after thirty years of service and became the Director of Human Resources at UP, serving in that capacity for ten years. During her time in managerial roles, she served on numerous institutional bodies and committees, often as chairperson, helping to transform higher education after 1994. "I am especially proud of having served as an elected staff representative on the councils of both universities where I was employed."

In 2013 she became the senior manager in the Office of the Principal of UP. When she retired in late 2017, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Cheryl de la Rey, hosted a retirement function in her honour. The two had grown close over the years they had worked together. At the event, De la Rey pointed out that very few women had occupied the senior positions in which Van Aswegen had served, making her a real pioneer.

Despite resounding success throughout her professional life, she still personally considers her husband and her three children her greatest pride and joy.



**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

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A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

C. ASSAf Policymakers' Booklets

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# Legends of South African Science II

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

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