

ELIZABETH SEMO MASIGA

(1943-2008)



Elizabeth Semo Masiga was born on 24th November, 1943 to Rachel Nemali and Joash Anaminyi at Pumwani Hospital in Nairobi. At the time of her birth, her parents were living in Nairobi where her father worked as an evangelist in the Anglican Church. Her mother was a trained primary school teacher. By African educational standards of the time, Elizabeth's parents were well educated giving her an advantage over the majority of her contemporaries. As staunch Christians they adhered to puritan ethics and brought up their children as devout Christians. Elizabeth was the first of six children and had four sisters and one brother.

EARLY EDUCATION

Elizabeth attended nursery school at Pumwani in Nairobi before joining Pumwani Primary School at the age of six. She was then transferred to Mungoye Church Missionary Society Primary School in Bunyore where she sat the Common Entrance Examination at the end of Standard Four in 1953. She qualified to go to Butere Girls Boarding School where she spent another four years of primary school.

At school Elizabeth worked hard maintaining good study habits and adhering to the strict school discipline. During school holidays Elizabeth joined the daily family routine taking charge of her siblings, distributing duties and ensuring that they were carried out properly. The responsible position she assumed at an early age enabled her to develop excellent leadership skills that she put to good use later in life.

At the end of Standard 8 Elizabeth sat for and passed the Kenya African Preliminary Examination (K.A.P.E.) with flying colours and joined Form one at Butere Girls Boarding Secondary School in 1958.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Elizabeth sat for the Cambridge General Certificate of Education Examination in 1961 and attained excellent grades. She was one of only seven girls picked from Butere Girls to pursue further studies at Alliance Girls High School in Kikuyu, Central Province.

At Alliance she met girls from diverse cultural backgrounds and forged strong friendships. Her leadership ability was recognised when she was appointed as school prefect in 1962. All these factors combined to enable Elizabeth to grow up into a responsible young woman. She looked back to the days at Alliance Girls High School with admiration and strongly believed that the school contributed significantly to moulding her into what she became. Four of her siblings followed in her footsteps and later also joined Alliance (her brother joining Alliance High School). On completion of Higher Cambridge School Certificate examination in 1963 Elizabeth joined University College of Nairobi, formerly the Royal Technical College, and Constituent College of University of East Africa. There she pursued a Bachelor of Arts degree course in English, Geography and Economics.

It was at the University that Elizabeth met Walter Masiga a Veterinary student. They fell in love and became so involved that they decided to get married even whilst still at University. They wedded at St. Stephens Cathedral in Kisumu on 24th April 1965.

Semo graduated in 1967 and it is remarkable that despite the responsibilities of married life she was the only student among those with her subject combinations to obtain an Upper Second Class Honours degree.

FAMILY PERSON

Elizabeth had five daughters, Caroline Ruth Masiga Kithinji, Helen Nambiro Maleche, Ann-Margaret Ayienga, Rachel Nemali and Julliette Phoebe. The girls have followed in their mother's footsteps and have done well academically and succeeded in life, which was a source of tremendous happiness and satisfaction to Elizabeth and Walter. She lived to see the birth of six grandchildren, Seiku Nkatha, Maseka Semo-Olesi, Hope Muthoni, Hannah Awinja, Semo Elizabeth and Zachary Walter Masiga. Her winsome smile can never be forgotten.

CAREER

On graduating from University, Elizabeth was employed by the Ministry of Education in the department of Examinations Administration. It was during this period that she decided to become an educationist because she found the profession interesting and challenging. In 1968 Elizabeth pursued a one-year postgraduate diploma in education after which she joined the teaching profession. Her first posting was to Mary Leakey Girls Secondary School in Kiambu District. The students looked up to her with great admiration and were motivated to take their education seriously. One of the fun extracurricular activities she participated in with the students was Scottish country dancing.

In 1970 she was transferred to the Aga Khan Secondary School in Nairobi where she taught up to the end of 1971. In her desire to further her education and strengthen her professional base, Elizabeth returned to the University of Nairobi in 1972 to pursue a Masters Degree in Geography specializing in urban development and sociology with the aim of ultimately influencing the development of schools in urban centres. Her goal at the time was to become an urban physical planner but on completion of the course Elizabeth changed her mind and went back to the Teachers Service Commission to continue with teaching.

She was posted to her old school, Alliance Girls, where she taught for a while and then joined Thogoto Teachers College in 1974 as a Trainer of Teachers.

JOINING THE INSPECTORATE

In 1975 Elizabeth applied for a job at the Inspectorate Division of the Ministry of Education. It was a very competitive interview because at the time, most of the Inspectors were Europeans. She passed and was appointed Subject Inspector in Geography, one of only three African Women Inspectors.

Elizabeth moved through the ranks from the grade of Inspector to the highest grade in the Inspectorate, the Chief Inspector of Schools. In February 1995, she became the first woman to occupy this post in independent Kenya. Her appointment was welcome news for the womenfolk in the country, but more so in Education. It was a boost to their morale and Elizabeth herself was thrilled; it was a dream come true as she had always looked forward to ascending to the highest position within the Inspectorate. While in the Ministry of Education she paid special attention to Girl-Child Education introducing the policy of pregnant girls continuing to finish their education.

According to David Aduda, the Education Editor, Daily Nation, 2002

...It was March 1995 and the Education Ministry had just broken a record of sorts: Elizabeth Masiga was now the chief inspector of schools, becoming the first woman in the position. The excitement was understandable: she was in charge of quality control, which meant she would be able to influence what went into the curriculum Ñ hopefully translating into gains in creating a level playing field for girls and boys in the education system. It was a triumph for activists and experts who had long argued for a systematic approach to bridging the gender imbalances in education, leading to the creation of a gender desk in the mid-nineties. But the best was yet to come. In January 1997, Masiga was appointed a permanent secretary in the ministry. The expectations shot through the roof. It was not without reason. Having presided over the creation of the Kenyan chapter of the Forum For African Women Educationalists (Fawe), she was singularly well placed to push the girls' agenda....

In 1997 she was appointed the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education becoming the first woman to hold this position. And then in 1998 she was posted to the Ministry of Tourism in the same position. She retired in 1999 after attaining the mandatory retiring age of 55. With the same momentum she thereafter undertook several projects including 'Care with a Vision'- An orphan care project, established an Academy (Mikisa Christian Academy) based on Christian Foundations and remained actively serving on school and hospital boards including Karen C Secondary School, Nairobi; Ganjala Secondary School, Busia; Maseno Hospital; Kenya Industrial Estates; and lately was Vice Chair of Kenyatta University Council.

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

After retirement she devoted her time to her husband working together on their projects, going with him for holidays abroad and within the country. Her relationship with her children was amplified sharing ideas; dreams and ambitions. During this time she counselled them on life skills and guided their career paths all of them settling in positions of influence.

She extended this counsel to the larger family who often approached her for advice and guidance. She was a very generous woman. She thought positively about everyone and always gave the benefit of doubt to the other person before coming to any conclusion. She was diplomatic in everything she did. Semo was never one to break a rule - not even pass the red traffic light. Elizabeth was so polite, to a fault. Never a rude word came from her mouth, she had no idea on how to swear or curse. She was one to avoid conflict, in fact in high school it was her younger militant sisters who would have to fight her battles and defend her over bullies. When it came to making speeches, one could not outsmart her, she was a natural, eloquent, smart.

Coming from a devout Christian home you can believe this, Semo was a disciplinarian like her father, strict in her principles. Things had to be done right - because that is the way to go.

Elizabeth was so much fun to be with, one could joke about so many things and when she laughed she laughed so hard tears rolled down her cheeks. Elizabeth was also a great counsellor and adviser.

As the first born child Semo led and guided her siblings well and looked out for each one of them. Her leadership was indisputable. For many years Elizabeth and Walter organised a New Year's party at their house to gather the larger family to start the New Year. When her parents were alive they too would be present so that her father would bless all the children and grandchildren at the

start of the year. Her siblings looked up to her for everything and loved her very much.

Elizabeth was a committed Christian and espoused Christian values. Small wonder when she retired and founded a school it had to be one founded on Christian values. She argued that the only proper foundation you can give a child is one where the foundation is God.

Elizabeth was diagnosed with liver cancer in August 2007. Family and friends prayed for her and were determined to see her live, and live she did for a further ten months after the diagnosis, succumbing, but not without a fight, on 19 June 2008 at 1255 p.m.

Elizabeth was a beloved wife, a precious mother, a wonderful sister, an adoring grandmother, an accommodating aunty, and a friend to remember.

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