

The Life of
ILSE MADGA EGGERS: A pioneer OT in South Africa
2 September 1928 — 19 August 2007

Ilse Sieburg was born in 1928 in Johannesburg. The Sieburg home in Yeoville, resounded with the activities of seven children and the ever-present visitors. On Sundays, the family often walked to the *Friedenskirche*, the Lutheran Church in Hillbrow, and Ilse spent many a happy evening at the parsonage, singing, doing crafts and reading books together with other children who became her dear friends. Over the years Ilse has kept close ties with this church and supported their projects.

After attending the German School, Ilse was in 1939 transferred to Yeoville Convent, where strict but loving nuns taught her good English and discipline. Even though Ilse spoke German at home, she was elected head girl in 1945, the last year of the Second World War. As refugees fleeing the Russian army streamed west into Germany, Ilse on her own initiative and without telling anyone took the train to Pretoria and asked the Prime Minister to permit the congregations to send care packages. The request was granted.

In 1940, Dr Hoffa, a half-Jewish refugee from Germany had been befriended by Ilse's father. Hoffa was a top paediatrician, and he became Ilse's friend and mentor. Without doubt, her decision to study Occupational Therapy at Wits (the University of the Witwatersrand) was strongly influenced by her admiration for him.

Ilse had already at the *Friedenskirche* learnt to play the guitar; it is hardly surprising that she quickly became involved with another good guitar player in the group, Richard Eggert from Natal. Ilse and Richard had 5 children, two of whom Erika Jooste and Ruth Schutz, studied OT in Pretoria.

Ilse utterly loved her husband and five children, and yet with her inquiring mind endeavoured to continue her chosen career in Occupational Therapy. After completing her Diploma at Wits, she undertook the Teachers Diploma in OT, at the University of Pretoria; during which (in 1962) she became Senior Lecturer at the OT College in Pretoria, a post she filled for twenty years. All OTs who qualified at the Pretoria College, during those 20 years, will remember her. Juggling her demanding teaching duties with an active husband and five small children was a superhuman task. Even so, she managed to conceive and develop the so-called MTA, an apparatus to motivate OT patients by rewarding exercise with electrical power to use for work or play. At this time OT training by the, then, Transvaal Provincial Administration, was under threat of being closed down. Ilse's efforts in demonstrating that MTA was a scientific, measurable tool to assess and treat orthopaedic patients, was one of the strong elements which persuaded the authorities to continue the course at the OT College. The MTA became the topic of her Master's thesis which she completed in 1989, at Medunsa, after converting her OT Diploma into a BSc degree in OT, at Wits.

Over the years, Ilse played a major role in the professional development of OT in SA, and held executive and honorary offices in national and international bodies. One of her major contributions to OTASA was establishing and then serving as the chairperson of the Remuneration Committee. This committee's first major task was to present documentation; and to negotiate at length with the Public Service Commission to get parity in salaries for all OTs in the country. The idea of this committee was initiated by Ilse when she realized that OTs who qualified from the newly established OT course at Medunsa, were not receiving the same salaries as OTs from the other universities. Furthermore, Ilse was one of the key persons who assisted in the development of the OT curriculum for Medunsa.

As chairperson of the OTASA Remuneration Committee, Ilse also steered an investigation, by the then, National Institute of Personnel Research to define and describe in detail the roles and functions of OT. This also assisted in persuading the Public Service Commission that OTs should be classified as professional rather than technical in the Public Service.

Another important achievement for this committee was to get the necessary recognition for OTs in the Education Department by their upgrade to the teacher's category, with the concomitant salary adjustments. She was presented with the Fellowship of OTASA, for her contribution to the Association.

From 1986, Ilse worked as a Senior Occupational Therapist at the, then, GaRankuwa Hospital and from 1994 as Research Fellow in the *Department of Hand and Microsurgery* at the adjoining university, Medunsa. She published various academic papers in this department; and her clinical work with 600 patients, with brachial plexus lesions, became the topic of her PhD in Hand and Microsurgery, which she completed at the age of 70.

Ilse continued to work at Medunsa until the beginning of 2007, producing a training DVD to pass on her extensive experience in evaluating and treating injuries of the hand and continuing to publish research results in collaboration with her friend-colleagues there. In the last year, her fascination with the human hand led her down a surprising but inevitable road: within the *University of The Third Age* (U3A), she taught a course called *The Magic of the Hand*, in which she tried to unify perspectives on the human hand in medicine, in art and in the Bible.

Ilse had great admiration for Rembrandt; less well known was her love for the philosopher and Old Testament translator Martin Buber, whose *I-Thou* principle of dialogue became a cornerstone of her interaction with people. Beethoven was long her preferred composer; and also appropriately reflected her occasional hot temper and strong will.

If it was not for pioneers like her, many of us would not have known the enriching experience of being an OT.

In early August 2007, multiple ailments coalesced into a crisis, and one night she suffered a mild stroke. As fiercely independent as Ilse was, she may have feared that her treasured independence was now seriously threatened. And through her habit of unceasing prayer, her longing for eternity had lately grown strong. In the last days of her life, Ilse refused all medical treatment and begged God to take her home. The hot-tempered prayer became peaceful acceptance in the last few hours. Ilse died, as she had lived, at peace with God and everyone.

To honour the memory of Ilse Eggers, who contributed so much to ensure the continued existence, in the early days, of the OT profession in SA.; and who inspired many OTs with her enthusiasm and conviction about OT, a request is made for contributions to the Lutheran Church in Hillbrow, in which Ilse was baptized, confirmed and got married.

One of the projects of the Lutheran Church, in Hillbrow, is known as “Kids week”. This has been identified by Ilse’s family as the most appropriate to honour her memory. Details of the projects of this church can be found at www.outreachfoundation.co.za

If you wish to honour her memory in this way, please make a direct payment into the Church’s account.

Bank: First National Bank (Parktown)

Branch Code: 250455

Account Name: Lutheran Community Outreach Foundation (Hillbrow)

Account Number: 620 8299 8364

Please use as reference: OT Ilse Eggers

Enquiries can be addressed to:

Estelle Shipham. Tel: 012-346-3296 / Cell: 083-342-5911 / e-mail: estellesh@webmail.co.za