

Tribute to Prof. Nana Araba Apt

by

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Prof. Nana Apt with some of her CoFA girls in 2015

This week in Accra we buried a friend and sister, whose presence in our lives cannot be replaced, and whose loss to us will be profound. Nana Araba Apt, Professor at the University of Ghana-Legon and Founding Dean of Academic Affairs at Ashesi University, was more comfortable simply being known as Nana Apt, a friend and servant to the vulnerable and forgotten.

Nana's first love, and most constant focus, was the plight of street girls, girls who could not complete their education, and the social policies, cultural norms, and practices that dismissed and demeaned women and girls, especially in Africa, but throughout the world. Her most recent books on this subject, Listening to Girls on the Street Tell Their Own Story: What Will Help Them Most? (1997), Children's Rights in Ghana: Reality or Rhetoric, with Robert Kwame Ame and DeBreanna LaFa Agybenyiga (2011, republished in 2012) demonstrated that her passions about these issues lasted until the very end of her life. The NGO that Nana established, CoFA -- College for Ama, was designed to give rural girls with few opportunities a summer learning experience to motivate them to seek secondary education completion and entry into a university. CoFA is now celebrating its tenth year with alumni including scores of girls who have escaped from poverty and rural isolation.

Nana was among the first and the most significant gerontologists in Africa for the last 40 years. She established and served on the boards of several NGO's serving the interests of the aging, including HelpAge Ghana. Her seminal book, Coping with Old Age in a

Changing Africa (1996) has become standard required reading for gerontology students around the globe.

Nana's advocacy for women was highlighted by being a keynote speaker to the General Assembly of the UN for The International Year of the Woman. Her collaborative work, Maintaining the Momentum of Beijing: The Contribution of African Gender NGO's with Naana Agyemang-Mensah and Margaret Grieco (1998) established her global role regarding women's rights nearly 20 years ago.

Nana's personal mission extended far beyond a sequence of targets on different classes of vulnerable people. Her books Learning How to Play to Win (2007) and Positioning Ghana: Challenges and Innovations (2015) taught reluctant policy makers that thoughtful answers to Africa's problems are available if only the courageous would accept the challenge. Chapter 7 of Learning How to Play to Win included the following: "Ghana needs to grow up. The excuses of being post-colonial or weak and dependent are old and tired. The discussions on what went wrong, archaic. Frankly such verbiage is boring and we deserve better." Nana didn't mince her words. She expected accountability and excellence from those in power, as she did also of herself.

For many years Nana's voice was a familiar one on radio programming in Accra, often chiding policy makers and those in power to do a better job regarding everything from sanitation to trade policy and providing decent education and housing for the masses. She was known on the air as "The Lioness of Ghana" and her views underscored her firm belief that government and commerce should serve the people. Her social critique would often be punctuated with the word "ridiculous" when specifically referring to a particularly vexing policy or program.

While at the University of Ghana, in part due to frustration that academic women faced a tough challenge to gain visibility and respect, Professor Apt established the Social Work and Social Policy programs at the University of Ghana. Women were encouraged to conduct research, to write, and to be activists in the struggles for social change.

She was the Founding Academic Dean at Ashesi University in Ghana. In this effort, she worked hand-in-hand with the fonder and President, Patrick Awuah, to establish Ashesi University with the principal mission of "providing ethical leadership to Africa."

I had the privilege of co-authoring several research papers, monographs and book chapters with Nana Apt, lending credibility to my own career and teaching me lessons that can only be learned while collaborating with true genius. I edited one of her books while she underwent medical treatment in Holland in 2007-2008, at her urging because she wanted to be sure that it was finished. She always kept her eye on the prize.

My wife Marian and I worked with Nana for whole semesters at Ashesi University and we usually lived in the same house. Through these months together we became a family. We also hosted Nana's wonderful housekeeper, Esi's daughter as an exchange student in Michigan; Araba graduated from Ann Arbor Pioneer High School as a member of the National Honor Society. Nana loved Araba as a member of her family.

Nana Apt was an insightful and tough-minded social critic who refused to compromise for expedience and took personal risks to call out corruption, foolish social policy, or failures of both government and private sector players to serve the people instead of exploiting them. She was a constant advocate for the youngest and oldest, most vulnerable people who live among us. Nana was one of those rare people who had no peer; she was unique, highly productive, deeply loved and respected globally. At her funeral service this week Patrick Awuah Jr., founder and President of Ashesi University, said, "Here lived a truly magnificent woman." Indeed, she was.

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