

'Fireside chat' with Mrs Mary Robinson

By Norman Taku - Centre for Human Rights

Posted on 08 August 2012



The Centre for Human Rights feels both honoured and delighted to have been afforded the opportunity to host Mrs Robinson for a memorable "fireside chat" in the Sanctuary Room, overlooking the Eternal Flame at Freedom Park in Pretoria, on 7 August 2012.

Mrs Mary Robinson is an Extraordinary Professor in the [Centre for Human Rights](#) and the [Centre for the Study of Aids](#) at the University of Pretoria.

This was indeed a very special occasion: The purpose of Mrs Robinson's current visit to South Africa was to deliver the 10th Nelson Mandela Foundation Lecture, which took place three days before our meeting at the Cape Town City Hall, the very place where Nelson Mandela delivered his first speech after he had been released from prison on 11 February 1990.

Prior to her departure to South Africa, Mrs Robinson had informed us that she would like to pay us a visit – such is her loyalty to our two centres and her passion for interacting with young human rights activists. A "fireside chat" was suggested and Freedom Park proved the perfect location for a close encounter between a world figure in human rights and young professionals and aspiring activists. With the audience gathered at the feet of the "Elder", Mrs Robinson first spoke for half an hour about her childhood, her education and her career.



Norman Taku, Assistant Director, Centre for Human Rights, UP, Pierre Brouard, Deputy Director, Centre for the Study of Aids, UP, Mary Robinson, Extraordinary Professor, CHR and CSA, UP, and Asha Ramgobin, Director, Human Rights and Development Institute (HRDI)

As the only girl and the middle child, growing up with four brothers meant that Mrs Robinson's struggle for equality and human rights had started early. After completing her studies in law at Trinity College, Dublin, she attended Harvard University during the time of the Vietnam War and encountered a different way of doing things. She returned to Ireland, where young people were generally expected to be demure and to be seen but not heard, and with "Harvard humility" (according to the man she would later marry) became a

committed and confident advocate for human rights. She was elected to the Senate at the age of 26 and, in the early 1970s, caused a stir by advocating for family planning in Catholic Ireland.

She spoke of her election as President of Ireland and what it had meant to be the first Head of State to visit Rwanda after the genocide. The challenges she faced and her accomplishments as the second UN High Commissioner for Human Rights are well known. Since then, she has been very active in a multitude of areas and under the umbrellas of many organisations, most recently through the establishment of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Change (MRFCCJ).

She held the audience's keen attention with the strength of her personality and presence, and brought much laughter and fun with anecdotes and very inspiring stories about her life and experiences. It is, however, the second part of the evening that Mrs Robinson most enjoyed: for almost another hour, she answered questions on everything from political repression and transnational corporate responsibility to the link between HIV/Aids and climate change. Drawing from her life and illustrious career, she offered thoughts and suggestions for meaningful change. She constantly exhorted the young people to use the formidable social media tools that exist today to map and track human rights violations and to push for accountability through publicity.

There is a saying among the Bemba of Zambia that "one who enters the forest doesn't turn back when he hears the twigs breaking". It seems that public service and human rights are a forest Mrs Robinson entered many years ago and that, despite the many breaking twigs, she stayed the course. Many of those in the audience on the evening are either about to, or have just entered, this forest. Her thoughts and suggestions will be useful tools as they face the perennial challenge of human rights for all.

It was an excellent evening. As hosts, we shone brightly as always, for which we owe a debt of gratitude to Carole Viljoen and Eric Lwanga, who saw to all the preparations and delivered a function that was as novel (even for us) as it was glamorous. The catering was excellent, the décor truly unique and the attendance just perfect. Thank you Eric and Carole for keeping the Centre's standard as high as always.

Dear Mrs Robinson, thank you for the privilege of being your hosts.

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