

OBITUARY

A fighter till the very end – the story of Merlyn Vaz

MERLYN VAZ, who passed away last Tuesday, was born Merlyn Verona Rosemary Pereira in Bombay, India, the daughter of Joseph Sebastian Pereira and Lourdes Sylvia Pereira on 29th August 1929.

After schooling in India she met and married Anthony Xavier “Tony” Vaz and went to live in Aden, South Yemen before moving to Britain in 1965. After the death of her husband five years later Merlyn retrained as a teacher and studied at Sydney Webb College, London before teaching at Stanley Road Junior School, in Teddington for many years. Whilst there she wrote and edited a book on Greek myths entitled *The Olympians*. In 1985 Merlyn moved to Leicester where she taught at Whitehall Primary School and twelve months later stood as the Labour Candidate for the County Council in Evington. In 1989, at the tender age of 61, she was elected as a Councillor for the Charnwood ward and became the first Asian woman ever to serve on Leicester City Council.

Despite chairing a number of Council Committees her main passion was the rights of pensioners and was elected the first Chairperson of the Council’s Pensioners Committee, which became the Senior Citizens Forum. She edited and produced the first ever *Pensioners Guide* which detailed elderly services in the City of Leicester and which was launched at the City Council offices by Jack Straw MP, now the Foreign Secretary and is still being produced by the Council.

In April 2003 when she stepped down from the Council after fourteen years, she established The Pensioners Award Scheme, an annual award that would recognise the work of pensioners. Cherie Blair, the Prime Minister’s wife, became the Patron and judges for the prize include Baroness Howells, the Bishop of Leicester and the editor of the Leicester Mercury. The scheme was renamed The Merlyn Trust in her honour.

At her Council retirement party in March which was attended by 300 family and friends and addressed by Peter Hain MP, the Leader of the House of Commons, she said what kept her going was her love of people and passionate belief in education. On her retirement card she wrote “never forget the pensioners”.

The last four years were tremendously hard



THE SERVICE of Thanks Giving for the life of Merlyn Vaz will take place at the Sacred Heart Church, Mere Road, Leicester this Saturday. The Lord Bishop of Southwarke the Rt Rev Tom Butler will preside over the service and the Lord Chancellor, Rt Hon Charles Falconer QC, will give the tribute. The Lord Mayor of Leicester will represent the City. A piper will lead the procession along Green Lane Road, Leicester the heart of the ward that Merlyn Vaz represented for 14 years immediately before the service.

for her and her family as she was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. When others would have given up and let the cancer overcome them Merlyn continued to bravely fight her many battles for fellow pensioners and support other worthwhile causes.

Merlyn leaves behind three children, Penny, Valerie and Keith, all who became lawyers and grandchildren, Dominic, Finn, Neil, Liberty, Luke and Anjali.

A £1 million sports hall at the Hamilton Community College — of which Merlyn was a governor — was dedicated to her memory last week. The new sports hall — which officially opens to both the school and the public next month — was visited by the Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer and was named the Merlyn Vaz Sports Centre. Eddie de Middelaer, principle of the college said: “She did an awful lot for the community, and she was a governor here for many years. Her special interests were teaching and learning, and she was passionate about the community and the kids here.” Keith Vaz had this to comment: “She was a governor there for so many years. It is a fitting tribute, she would have loved it. The family are delighted and honoured and hope that we do her proud.”

Shanti, Shanti, Shanti