

MANDELA'S RIGHT-HAND WOMAN TALKS TO THE

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EXCLUSIVE

 by **Pamela Owen**

NELSON Mandela gently holding the arm of his white assistant became a potent symbol of racial harmony in South Africa's rainbow nation.

The increasingly frail leader relied on devoted Zelda la Grange, an Afrikaner from a traditional family who in his freedom fighter days would have been a sworn enemy.

Zelda, 43, dedicated 19 years of her life to the inspirational father of the nation, who died this month aged 95.

She has never married or had children and would work up to 18 hours a day arranging his diary. She was by his side as he met everyone from the Spice Girls, to Colonel Gaddafi and the Queen, and travelled the world with him to conferences and sports events.

Protective Zelda controlled access to Mandela with such tenacity that she earned an unflattering nickname.

She says: "He would agree to far too many things and I had to be the one to make the call and tell people it was not possible. I've been called many names because of it. Rottweiler is one of them."

The man who had just become President made an immediate impression on Zelda, then a 24-year-old government typist, when she accidentally met him in August 1994.

Innocence

She burst into tears, a reaction she would come to understand over the years. She says: "Madiba was not just an incredible human being, he also made us appreciate our own need and aspirations for greatness."

"The thing that immediately crosses your mind is, 'I sent this man to jail. My people sent this man to jail'."

He held her hand and comforted her and, speaking perfect Afrikaans, said: "No, no, no, this is not necessary, you're overreacting a bit."

When Zelda calmed down Mandela asked her at length about her family. She says: "There was no special treatment – he did that with all his staff, black or white."

The daughter of a brewery logistics manager, Zelda grew up during the apartheid years in a middle-class Pretoria home with brother Anton, now 46.

She had little or nothing to do with black people or politics and hardly knew of Mandela.

"To us apartheid was the way it was supposed to be. Like most Afrikaners, we considered ourselves superior."

"When Nelson Mandela was to be freed in 1990 I remember dad saying we would be in big trouble but I didn't imagine it would affect my life."

In 1995 the man known as Tata Madiba took Zelda to Japan for a state visit although at first she declined the offer, not realising she would be paid for it. "In the beginning it may


HAND OF FRIENDSHIP

Mandela and Zelda at 2006 local elections in South Africa

Picture: JAMES OATWAY

I was the Afrikaner girl who became Madiba's rottweiler

have mattered I was white but later I forgot about these things. One of the wonders of Nelson Mandela was he always focused on people's similarities, not their differences."

The next year she was the only secretary to accompany him on a state visit to France. She said: "After that I got more involved in his day to day business. He'd insist on me going everywhere with him."

"In his eyes I personified the typical Boer and that was fine with me."

When Mandela retired in 1999, Zelda became solely responsible for his diary and



SUPPORT: In 2004 at a rugby match, left, and an Aids summit

earned the "rottweiler" tag. She says: "The one person you have to please is your employer. You can't take a job like that and expect to win a popularity contest." She was so committed to

Mandela that she would work from 5am into the evening. Her schedule was so gruelling that one year friends spent longer house-sitting in her home than living in their own place. Now,

Zelda says she will miss Mandela's sense of fun and his empathy with children. "His sharp sense of humour never failed. When a very tall person met him, he'd ask them, despite his or her age, if they're still growing taller. It's not something you expect Nelson Mandela to ask and you begin to appreciate the humour in it."

"He also had a way with kids and loved and appreciated their sense of innocence."

Zelda says that despite the 27 years he spent in jail, she never saw a hint of bitterness from the great South African.

"Even when he got angry at

the Afrikaners in negotiations he never made comments that related to his incarceration.

"He was stubborn and once he made up his mind there was no way anyone could change it. But that didn't dictate how he related to people."

Zelda said: "I loved him deeply. You're never prepared enough for someone's passing. You're still shocked and saddened when it comes."

"I hope people will continue to support his legacy by emulating his ideals."

"He is the hero of our time and a hero never dies. It is up to us to keep his legacy alive."

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