

RENÉE SABATIER 1949–1999:
A Life Fully Lived

Richard Burzynski

Renée Sabatier died in Lusaka, Zambia on February 24, 1999. I received notice of her passing from a colleague whose message stated: “another bright light has been extinguished and the world has become a little darker.” I was shocked—and profoundly saddened to hear of her passing. My own world had indeed become darker.

Renée had a very rich history of which many of us were privileged to be a part. Professionally, she was co-founder of the international Panos Institute and of its AIDS and Development Unit. She wrote several books on HIV/AIDS, including *AIDS and the Third World* and *Blaming Others: Prejudice, Race and AIDS Worldwide*. At the time of her death, she had been the director of the Canadian Public Health Association’s Southern African AIDS Training (SAAT) Program since 1990. She was also a member of this journal’s editorial board.

Renée was educated in Italy, Canada, and the United Kingdom. She held master’s degrees in social research/psychology and in comparative democratic systems, focusing on the linkages between health and human rights. Prior to her work in southern Africa, she had worked as a counselor, trainer, and teacher in the fields of rape, sexual abuse, and

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HIV in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy.

Most of the world knew her as an activist, an intense woman with professional commitment and engaged in mobilizing the fight for social justice. These qualities were clearly in evidence through her writings and her work. She continually struggled to incorporate culturally appropriate awareness of gender and human rights principles into HIV counseling and practice. Her focus and tremendous discipline enabled her to work closely with all types of people, concentrating on them and lending advice and support. When I spent time with Renée in Harare, Zimbabwe, I saw how her passion and intellect were transformed into a daily practice.

Renée spent the last 10 years of her life living in Harare. Her life revolved around work. As the director of the SAAT Program, Renée and her staff covered 11 countries in the region. She was always on the move, never sitting still too long, always trying to make things happen when others would not take the risk.

When she was not at the office, she was home surrounded by critical essays, reports, and books. All subjects were covered in her extensive library. I remember waking up at 2:00 A.M. one night while staying with her in Harare to find her pacing around the hallway among the books piled on the floor. When I asked her what she was doing, she said that there were important passages from some reports that she thought I should be aware of. I stayed up with her all night listening to what I needed to read or re-read in order to function more effectively in my work. She challenged me to do more and to be more self-aware of my personal place within the larger whole.

In her daily life, Renée practiced the kinds of principles that she wrote about. Social justice was not just something that was tossed into the air as an idea or left to institutions. Rather it started with each person. If we did not integrate these principles in our own lives, she asked, how would we ever convince others to do likewise? When I hear others using the concepts of social justice and human development today, my thoughts go to Renée. For me, she made these concepts real. Behind this gigantic personality I saw a pas-

sionate woman whose interactions with me, with those I knew, and with ordinary people on the street in her adopted city impressed me greatly.

As with many others who pass through our lives, my remembrance of Renée goes beyond the work for which she was known. Renée was a teacher and a person. She pushed, challenged, and persuaded, and she was a light for me and for many others. She lived her life to the fullest. Her legacy is considerable.