

# Fabulous farewell to unique Eugenie

by Joe Boyle

THE beautiful melodies of an African choir filled the crematorium as family and friends gathered at the funeral of Haslingden pensioner Dr Eugenie Cheesmond.

The choir sang as the 88-year-old's colourful cardboard coffin was carried by family from the gates at Accrington cemetery.

Family and friends then spoke - interspersed with more songs - during a celebration of Eugenie's remarkable life before the choir sang Fambaynaiye (Go well) in the Ndbele language and led those attending out of the hall.

Her family, friends and the choir then returned to her home at Deardengate and sang during the afternoon.

## Fireworks

In the evening, family and friends let off fireworks to mark her passing.

It was a wonderful farewell to a unique woman.

Eugenie was born in Hove in June 1919 and moved with her family to South Africa when she was six weeks old.

In 1944, she graduated from the University of Capetown with a degree as bachelor of medicine and bachelor of surgery; she spent three years as resident house surgeon in various hospitals in South Africa.

For five years she was senior medical officer in Capetown Free Dispensary where she radically changed patient care.

She said that everyone, including whites, had to wait their turn to be treated and could not queue-jump in front of black people.

The clinic was transformed during her time and when she left, it was treating thousands rather than hundreds per year.

She spent two years in Capetown public health department dealing with child welfare, TB, and antenatal care.

Eugenie then left South Africa to move to Cambridge with her second husband Denis Rutovitz.

And from 1956 she worked at Brookfields Infectious

Diseases Hospital, Cambridge, and then had a spell with Salford and Manchester public health department.

The family moved to Kenya in 1962 where she worked as a general practitioner at a government hospital and enjoyed the mountains and game parks and supporting KANU (Kenya African National Union) in its bid to lead Kenya to independence in 1963.

She returned to Britain in 1964 to become an assistant medical officer at Oldham, then a GP and child welfare officer at Stockport and Cheshire.

## Radical

Eugenie, pictured, had a radical approach to medicine. She involved patients in their own care and was profoundly opposed to the practice of automatically prescribing drugs.

She became psychiatric registrar at St Thomas's Hospital, Stockport, in 1966 and then moved to the same post at Parkside Hospital, Macclesfield, until 1970.

At this time, drug addicts

in the area had two options: jail, or psychiatric hospital.

In 1969 Eugenie was meant to open a residential drugs unit at Parkside Hospital. At the last minute opening was cancelled due to hospital board opposition, but the courts had already started to refer addicts and people were also referring themselves.

Eugenie took them into her own home. She was asked by the hospital administration to evict them; she refused, saying that she could have whoever she wished as guests in her home. This led to her losing her job at Parkside.

But her open-house policy for drug addicts had already put her on the front cover of World Medicine, an in-house magazine for the medical profession.

Typically for Eugenie, she then set up the Lifeline Trust, one of the only non-medical drug treatment services in the country at the time. The first Lifeline day centre opened in Manchester in 1971.

She worked as director at Lifeline until 1976 when she



moved on and took a post for Lancashire Area Health Authority as the liaison between social and health services.

This is believed to have been the first post of its kind and she did this until retiring in 1984; she introduced innovations including inspecting elderly care homes unannounced.

## Health food shop

She went on to set up health food shop Zobiluke in her house at Haslingden in 1984 and made her premises available to enable Oxfam to get established in the town.

She joined the Labour party in 1978 and her house was often the party's HQ on polling day.

Eugenie was active in the anti-apartheid movement from 1960 onwards and set up the Haslingden branch.

And it was a source of

great joy that she was asked to go out and work as an observer for the first free elections in South Africa.

Eugenie was a keen sportswoman, played hockey and enjoyed riding and walking. She started climbing in the early 1940s and became an ardent mountaineer and skier, climbing in South Africa, the USA and Europe.

She did climbs for her 70th and 75th birthdays and her last climb was in Australia's Blue Mountains in 2001, aged 84. Always willing to try new things, she went paragliding for the first time in April this year.

She is survived by her sons Alastair and Neelam, daughter Jay and their partners, Claire, Sucheta and Louise, and her former husband Denis Rutovitz.

She also leaves her grandchildren Zobi, Luke and Leela Rose.