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Spirited general who fought for the poor

By Michael Holman

If wars have their unknown warriors, whose sacrifice enlightens and inspires survivors, then Susie Smith should be celebrated as an unknown general in the global battle against poverty.

For three decades Smith, who died in Oxford last week aged 55, fought for the poor – first as a foot soldier in Africa and for the last 10 years as a compassionate and inspirational counsellor at Oxfam, the international development agency.

Her experience and enthusiasm, her instinctive grasp of what made people tick and the serenity with which she endured the ravages of cancer, gave her a unique role, allowing her to challenge conventional wisdom within Oxfam's ranks or the aid movement as a whole.

The outcome of one challenge in particular, mounted by Smith in the late 1980s, changed the nature of aid and development. Although Africa's deepening crisis had been belatedly acknowledged, the old charity laws were a constraint on the operations of Oxfam and other agencies. Matters such as debt, unfair trade rules and apartheid were deemed beyond the pale.

Largely thanks to Smith, drawing on her knowledge of southern Africa, the law was amended. It marked a watershed. A rejuvenated Oxfam emerged as an international force for change and together with other agencies mobilised public support for a fairer world.

“Susie showed it was not possible to ‘depoliticise’ development,” said a colleague, “and blew the old charity law out of the water. More than anybody, she embodied the spirit of Oxfam.”

In the last years of her life, Smith made the fight against Aids her priority, reporting from a front line that stretched from India to southern Africa, and urging a comprehensive response to a spreading crisis. It was her concerns and hopes that fuelled her determination to keep travelling until the last months of her life, refusing to give way to cancer – initially diagnosed in 1997 with a recurrence in 2003. Her illness took a heavy toll but never diminished her intellect, eroded her compassion or undermined the quality of her advice.

One of her last journeys took her back to the land which had always been close to her heart – Zambia. Smith had been based in the capital Lusaka in the early 1980s, when the country

was still in the front line of the war to liberate southern Africa from white minority rule.

She was at her happiest then, sharing a beer at sundown and debating the concerns of the day while sitting on the veranda of the late Harry and Marjorie Chimowitz, exiled South Africans who turned their home into a haven for the men and women who were to become their countries' leaders.

Never one to duck controversy, flinch from tough decisions or indulge received wisdom, Smith was a rare breed in international development: somebody who combined a deep knowledge of Africa with an unbending commitment to make the world a better place.

In the old apartheid days, the African National Congress adhered to the principle that "nobody is irreplaceable". Sadly, some people are – and Smith is one of them. She is survived by her daughter, Sarah, who gave her mother a further reason for fighting on.

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