

No regrets

After 45 years in the African National Congress, does Mma Frances Baard have any regrets, *SPEAK* asked her when we visited her home

“No, not at all. My greatest wish is that I live to vote for the African National Congress on April 27 next year,” Mma Baard says.

Frances Baard was born on October 1 1909, in Beaconsfield, Kimberley. She was the fifth in a family of seven children. Today, this mother of two children, Benjamin and Tokela, lives in Mabopane in Bophuthatswana — the place where she was banished to in the 1960s.

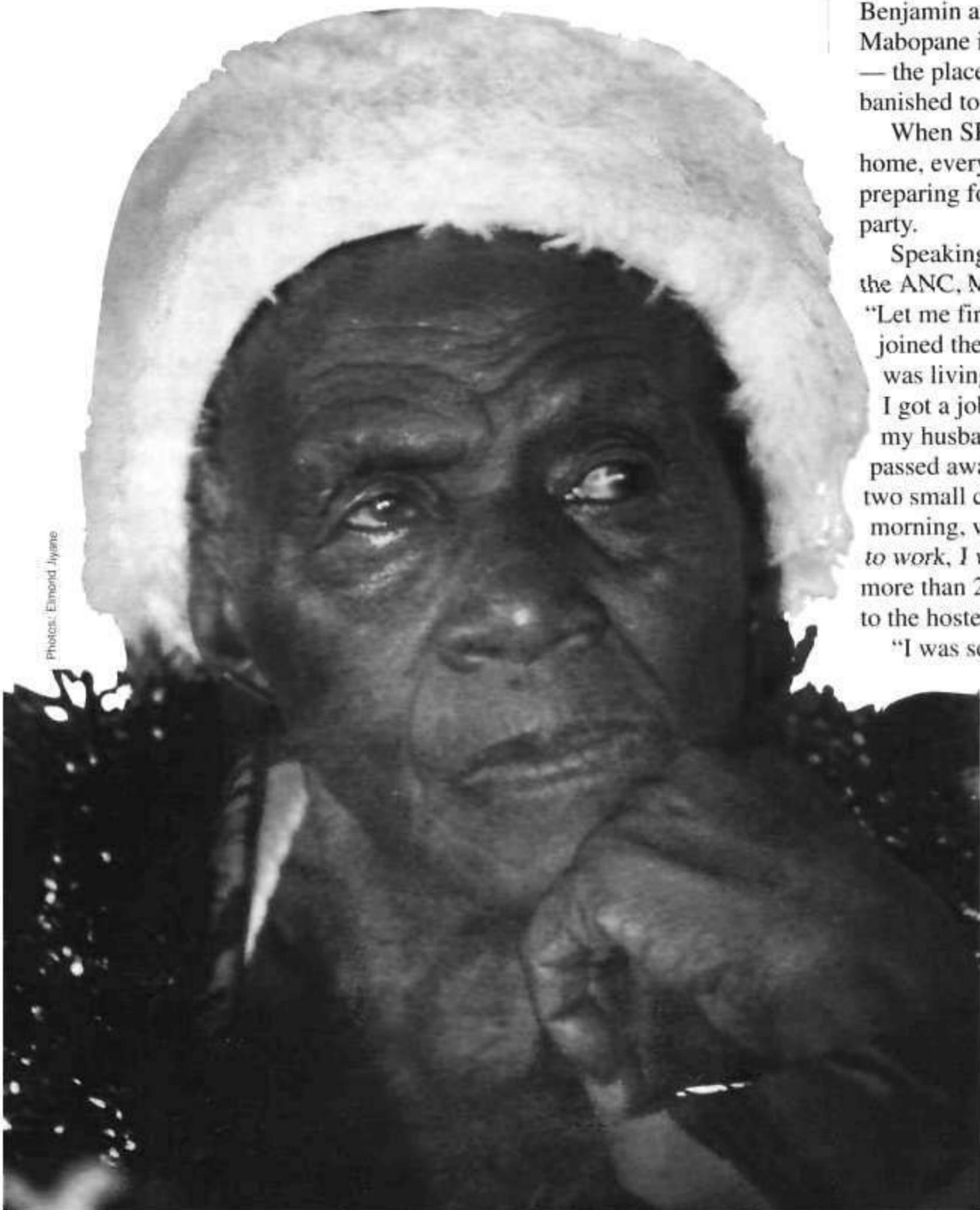
When *SPEAK* arrives at her home, everyone is busy preparing for her 84th birthday party.

Speaking about her life in the ANC, Mma Baard says: “Let me first tell you how I joined the ANC in 1948. I was living in Port Elizabeth. I got a job in a factory after my husband, Lucas Baard, passed away and I had to raise two small children. One rainy morning, while I was walking to work, I was shocked to see more than 20 bodies lying next to the hostel.

“I was scared to go and look at the bodies, but felt I had to find out what had happened to them.

“I went to the ANC office, although I was not a member, to report what I had seen. I met Raymond Mhlaba and Robert Mji who were the ANC leaders in the region. They told me

Photos: Elmond Jiyane





Mma Baard celebrates her 84th birthday. An ANC victory in next year's elections will make her life's struggles worth it for her, she says

the people I had seen were not dead but asleep. They had come from the Transkei and Ciskei in search of jobs and could not get accommodation in the hostel, so they decided to sleep outside," remembers Mma Baard.

"Raymond Mhlaba asked me to come and talk to people at their next ANC meeting about what I had seen at the hostel. That was the beginning of my life with the ANC."

Mma Baard says, since that day, she has never looked back. She dedicated the next 45 years of her life to organising for the ANC, particularly women.

While working at a canning factory, Mma Baard met veteran trade unionist Ray Alexander. Together they organised workers into the Food and Canning Workers Union from 1948.

She soon became a key ANC and trade union leader in

Port Elizabeth.

Mma Baard was one of the organisers and was in the front row of the famous women's march on August 9 1956. On that day, 20 000 women marched on the union buildings in Pretoria to protest against passes. When the Federation of South African Women was formed in 1954, she was elected to its national executive committee.

Mma Baard's leadership and commitment was invaluable during the Campaign of Defiance Against Unjust Laws. She was also active in the campaign against Bantu Education in 1955.

But her political involvement did not go unnoticed by the government and she came to know the inside of prisons very well. She was one of the people charged in the famous Treason Trial in 1956. While on trial, Mma Baard spoke these words from the dock: "No matter where you work,

unite against low wages; unite into an unbreakable solidarity and organisation."

In 1960, Mma Baard was detained under the State of Emergency. She spent one year in solitary confinement in 1963 and was then sentenced to five years in jail. After she was released in 1969, the government banished her to Boukenhoutfontein near Mabopane.

Mma Baard remembers a voice calling to her as she walked out of prison: "Mma Baard, go to the Council of Churches. They will help you". The voice belonged to Winnie Mandela.

"That voice was very important to me, because I was just dumped at Boukenhoutfontein. I did not know where I was. This dry place was not my home. The worst thing was that I had no idea where my children and relatives were," she says.

"After my ban was lifted, I stayed in Mabopane and started a new fight against Lucas Mangope of Bophuthatswana after my applications to open a community centre and other community projects were turned down. Today I have lots of friends in this homeland, both young and old, and I do not care about Mangope and his ministers. I am only waiting for the general elections on April 27 1994 when the ANC will be taking over.

"After those elections, I will feel that the struggles I have had to endure in my life will have been worth it, and I can die in peace," says Mma Baard with a smile. ☺