

Natal Midlands Black Sash

JOAN KERCHHOFF interviewed by Lorenza Cowling

on 30 August 2010

**Interview for the records of the Alan Paton Centre,
University of KwaZulu- Natal.**

1. Would you like to say something about yourself - important or significant things about your background?

Joan: My father was a teacher and had a liberal outlook on life but my parents were not political. I suppose you could say that I was exposed to liberal values whilst I was growing up.

2. When did you join Black Sash and why did you do this?

Joan: I am not too clear about the date. I think it was in about 1973. There was nothing really specific that I can recall that motivated me to join. But there was a small group of us. We were almost like a Women's Institute group and met in a hall in the Old Cathedral where we raised funds by selling marmalade and pots plant etc... later we went on to meet at Mamie Corrigan's flat.

3. Can you remember some of the people in key positions in the Natal Midlands Branch when you joined, particularly in the 70's?

Joan: I don't remember all the people that were involved in those days but I do remember Bunty Biggs and Mamie who I have mentioned already. Also Pam Wellington and Joy Roberts.

4. Did you ever work in the Advice Office? If so who were the key people there?

Joan: Yes I did - I think it was 1976. The A.O. started in Thomas Street where the union gave us the use of an office there. I was in between jobs at the time and worked in the A.O. once a week for about a year. Busi Nyide was there full-time. Maggie Clarke used to work/volunteer on the same days as me. The main issues that we dealt with were UIF and Workers Compensation etc. The whole issue of the setting up of the A.O. was quite a contentious / difficult one. Many people felt that we should be involved in political issues opposing the government on specific issues. The A.O. was accepted as a complementary to that.

5. Would you like to comment on the work of the A.O.? Do you think the work of the A.O. changed over the years- if so in what ways? (Bail fund established in 1958 – Athlone - to assist women being fined for not having a “pass”) (A.O.Trust formed in 1984 to receive overseas donations)

Joan: Not really, save to say that the AO was accepted as complementing the political work of the Black Sash.

6. What was the B.S. doing when you joined, and why was this considered important?

Joan: As I said, when I first joined it was more like a W.I. Institute, as we sold jams and plants and things to raise funds. More importantly we had anti-apartheid speakers at public meetings and of course the stands outside the old cathedral.

7. Can you remember any important Black Sash achievements in the 70's?

Joan: I attended a couple of National Conferences. But I cannot recall any particular achievements

8. Were you ever harassed by the Security Police or others? If so, who and when?

Joan: I cannot recall any particular incident of harassment but I do remember that we were always photographed at the stands. I recall one time when I was standing in Longmarket Street and it was raining. I kept raising the umbrella so that the security policeman trying to photograph me had quite a difficult time!

9. Did you take part in protest stands and how did you find that? Were you ever charged for taking part in an illegal gathering and what transpired?

Joan: Yes I did take part in stands. One was never quite sure what effect they had as most of the white people had a very negative attitude towards us. But at least we felt as though we were doing something to show the government that there was opposition to their policies. The group stands were more comfortable as there was a sense of solidarity amongst us. The single stands were more nerve wracking for this very reason, and the public could be quite rude (and sexist!)

10. How well did the Midlands branch relate to other branches in the country? Did you meet any members from other parts of the country?

Joan: There wasn't any real contact... Except for Sheena Duncan who would travel around and visit the branches.

11. Was this region involved in the writing any of the “You and....” booklets in the 70's?

Joan: Yes I was - Pat Merrett as well, but I don't recall the names of the others that were involved. I also remember that it took rather a long time to get it finished

12. How was the work here different from anywhere else .Do you think this branch had any influence on other parts of the country?

Joan: I don't know what the other branches were doing or if their work was any different from ours.

13. What other organizations did you work with?

Joan: We did liaise with several NGOs. Especially when political or humanitarian crises arose. The ones that spring to mind are PACSA and the ECC. I am sure there were others... An Education NGO, AFRA but I can't recall them all. Some who worked from Ubunye House, SACC...

14. The membership of the organization closed in 1995, a year after the first democratic elections, by a majority resolution of delegates at a special conference. The A.O. remained and was renamed the Black Sash Trust with a mandate to carry on the work of the B.S. Thus began the transition from a volunteer-managed to a professionally-managed organization. How do you feel about the closure of the membership organization.?

Joan: I accepted the decision at that time. I was concerned about the advice office as I was involved in the management but Ashnie was in the Advice Office at that time and it seemed as though that part of it would be OK. But in retrospect I think that the decision was premature.

15. How do feel about your involvement in B.S. looking back?

Joan: I feel as though it was an excellent way of learning ...lots of discussions and debating....with the other women in the group and speakers who addressed us from time to time. There were also problems that all groups had in those times. We felt quite vulnerable to informers....so we were unable to trust strangers...the sense of being at the mercy of the security police was also quite difficult. It was interesting and quite alarming that the security police believed that we had contacts with Moscow, etc. and really we were just a group of concerned women.

16. What was your relationship with other members of the B.S. and did it alter your outlook?

Joan: There were many members who, on a practical basis, were doing some really good work, but I don't think that the Sash changed my outlook in any particular way. I was a member of other organizations as well, so its difficult to say.

17. What are the most important things you gained from working in the organization and what are the most important things that you gave to it?

Joan: Especially in the early days of the Sash it was important to me to have contact with other like-minded women. It felt so necessary not to be alone in one's stand against the government of the day. It was also a forum for me to support the campaign for a Basic Income Grant.

I do remember going to some training courses for the A.O... in Cape Town I think. There I learnt lots of valuable things about working in the A.O.... Like not creating dependency in clients, empowering people to help themselves. This training was very useful in other areas of my life

I'm not sure if there was anything important that I gave to Sash except that I was a member who worked in the A.O, did stands and also was part of the management team of the A.O.

On 2 September, Joan Kerchhoff wrote:

Dear Mary,

Lorenza put together the Sash interview we did. I didn't mention the specific issues we demonstrated against (other than apartheid generally). I hope these have been recorded.

Also, I know there were differences of opinion during the years of political violence. Some Sash members tended to be more liberal - condemning all violence equally - and possibly more supportive of Inkatha, than those of us in KZN. Whether this needs to be mentioned at all, I don't know.

All the best,

Love
Joan