

## **Natal Midlands Black Sash**

**ANNE HARLEY** (Formally, Anne Truluck) interviewed by Mary Kleinenberg  
on 26 October 2010

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

I am Anne Harley and it's the 26 October 2010

Mary: Anne, do you want to say something about yourself?

Anne: I see you say on the questionnaire important and significant things but I'm not really sure what that means.

Mary: I suppose what I'm asking is why you had any interest in working for the Black Sash?

Anne: OK

Mary: It's sort of background

Anne: Alright. I came to Pietermaritzburg specifically to work for the Black Sash, Midlands Region, doing research on the political violence in the early nineties - I think I arrived in September 1990, and spent two years with the Black Sash being paid to do this work, and then after that I was involved in a voluntary capacity.

Mary: Were you a member of the Sash in Cape Town?

Anne: No, I wasn't a member and I'm not really sure if I can explain why I wasn't. I was very aware of the Black Sash and my mother was a member. In the work that I had been doing, which was working in the research department of the Democratic Party, as it then was, I was asking questions around things like detainees, political violence, protests that had happened and security police harassment of people, so we liaised with the Black Sash a fair bit. In some of the initiatives that we worked on, like the Open City Initiative against the Group Areas Act in Cape Town, I worked quite closely with Helen Zilla, believe it or not, so I was very aware of the work of the Sash, and I admired the organization a lot, which is why when the job came up I was very keen to apply. Also, I had had it in my head since I was a little girl that I wanted to live in Pietermaritzburg.

Mary: Amid much laughter - I wonder why?

Anne: Ja, so that was how it happened.

Mary: Would you like to tell us what you were employed to do - what was the job?

Anne: The job was specifically to do research on the political violence, but in particular on the involvement of white South Africans. At that stage what was being projected to the public was that it was black on black violence – Inkatha vs the UDF (United Democratic Front) which was really disguising the amount of involvement by the State and by white people in positions of power, and, I think that the Black Sash was trying to gather some evidence to support the argument that it wasn't simply a black on black conflict. So, that was what I was asked to do, that was the job.

Mary: For you to get to know Pietermaritzburg you updated what was then called *The Divided City*, I think, a little booklet.

Anne: Ja, the Sash thought that it would be a useful thing for me to do because I knew absolutely nothing about Pietermaritzburg or KwaZulu Natal. I had grown up in Pretoria, then I'd gone to University in Cape Town and I'd been there for about nine years, so I really knew very little about the City and the Midlands. I was given this task of updating this booklet which was essentially about the ways in which apartheid had divided the City, and it was a very intelligent way of bringing me into working in the context because I got a very rapid sense of the City and the history of the City. I was given about three months to do this. I got to meet a lot of people and talk them – people who had been involved in doing research in various organizations, and it really helped me a lot. I think we called it *The Fractured City*, the updated one. I was thinking about it last week when I was at a seminar and a PhD student from Hungary who was using Foucault's work and looking at what she referred to as the shattered city. It just reminded me immediately of *The Fractured City* which I hadn't thought of in years and years, and some of the things she was saying were just so much what the *Fractured City* was pointing to - the ways in which certain people just don't count and are excluded, cut-off, and that's what the *Fractured City* is all about.

Mary: And then your research ended up as a booklet?

Anne: It was called *No Blood on our Hands*, and then there was quite a long sub-title which I can't remember. I thought it was quite an important piece of work, and I was very honoured to be involved in it, because, I think what it did was make the ways in which white people had been involved very clear. It looked at business, local government, and at the State, both in terms of government officials and also security forces. It used what was really very much in the public domain so it wasn't about some sort of secret thing that was hidden away, it was about simply taking what was already there. I remember going and sitting in court cases and reading affidavits and spending hours and hours in the Natal Society Library reading newspapers. It was all there, it was really a question of putting it together in a way that made it become very obvious. I did do a lot of interviews all over the Midlands with people in local government, in business, and some security force people. For me, in those interviews there was a lot of

fudging, and a lot of it was fairly dishonest. I remember interviewing the then Minister of Police, Adrian Vlok, and knowing that he was lying but there was nothing I could do about it as a little researcher. So for me what was important about it was that the stuff that was already in the public domain needed cataloguing which made the involvement so blatantly obvious that no one could really argue against it.

Mary: It might have been in the public domain but it wasn't well known.

Anne: No, it wasn't, and that was the thing, I think. When you were reading isolated newspaper articles that were presenting it as black on black violence, simply including one paragraph about the involvement of the police, or people saying that there had been police with guns who had been on the side of Inkatha, the real issue was kind of glossed over. I think that the way we did it brought those things together and made them much more obvious.

Mary: Anne, did you find it quite difficult working in the midst of this pretty awful violence?

Anne: It was awful. I did find it very difficult. Oddly enough just sitting in the Library was the hardest in some ways because it was just day after day, after day reading this awful stuff in a quite isolated context. I remember John Morrison (the Librarian) used to be around and he would come and check on how things were going so that was one person I did get to speak to a little bit, but, for the most part, it was quite alienating.

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What helped a lot was that I quite rapidly became integrated into the networks of the people who were doing this work and there were a lot of people who were doing it, pretty remarkable people. That helped, but what also helped was that I knew that I'd been lucky; I'm not sure that that's the right word, to have escaped it because I arrived after the seven day war. In some ways I didn't have to experience the intensity of that particular horror, so reading about it was about as bad as it got for me. But, certainly going out into communities and having people talk about it was a very disturbing thing and I remember feeling incredibly angry about what was happening and about the ways in which it was being lied about. It was the lying that really made me very angry, but doing the work with other people helped.

I didn't know anybody when I arrived in Pietermaritzburg, not a soul, but because I'd been working in parliament for the Democratic Party, although I wasn't a member of the Democratic Party (DP) and didn't support it, I had met and been in contact with some of the DP people who were in Pietermaritzburg, in particular Radley Keys. I had spoken to him on the phone many times but only ever in the relationship of him giving us information about which we could then ask Parliamentary questions. But when I came here I made contact with him because he had been very involved in the monitoring of violence. I found this a very helpful relationship because Radley was quite well connected and quite open to other people on his turf, he wasn't at all protective.

Because of where I was working, and I know there is a later question about this, I was just around the corner from, and then in the Pacsa (Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness) building, so I was in contact with Pacsa people. I ended up sharing a house with Nianhla Hadebe who was one of the violence monitors so I knew him very well and we were able to de-brief a bit about what we were doing. So that kind of slotting into what was already there made it a lot less traumatic.

I do remember at some stage, and I can't remember when in the process, you, Jenny Clarence and I meeting at various points and talking about the violence, and I remember finding that quite emotional but a very good thing that helped me to talk through some of the emotions that I was having and dealing with.

Mary: I think that we could see that you were having quite a tough time and we had come across this wonderful hand-book called *In Our Own Hands*.

Anne: I still own it.

Mary: Mine's gone. I lent it to someone. I think we offered you professional counseling and you suggested that this might help. It was useful for us too because talking to you about it helped us understand more, and it also helped us because we had been here during that seven day war and it was really horrific. So, it was a good process, I thought, and I'm glad that you found it good. You said so at the time, but now you are remembering it as good.

Anne: I remember it very well and how helpful those sessions were. But I was also very well supported in the job. That was the nature of the reference group but it wasn't just the reference group, it was about Sash. It wasn't like working for some company or the university, there was a "Sashness" about it that I have never experienced in any other job. It was a very supportive space and a lot of that I think was about the fact that it was women. I have subsequently experienced jobs, and before that, with women who were not supportive, but I found that Sash was a really supportive women's space. As an organization, you were a human being, and a woman, before you were an employee, volunteer or whatever your actual professional relationship was. I think you are right, I probably did need some help, but I don't think I needed it as badly as some of the other people that I met along the way who just were not in that space, so I really feel that that was a crucial aspect of it with Sash as this very caring women's organization.

Mary: I am very glad to hear that. I must say that I have always found Sash a caring, supportive organisation. You talked about the reference group. Was that the Sash people or the research group that I think included John Wright.

Anne: There was John Wright, Simon Burton and John Aitchison, all academics at the then Natal University, but I don't think John Aitchison ever came to a single meeting. However, he did make time for me and that is how I got to know him first. I remember meeting him in his office in the New Arts building, specifically as a member of the reference group, to talk about not just the work that he had been involved in which was a lot of the monitoring stuff, but also as an advisor to me in my own research. That reference group was a very important one, although I do remember, fairly early on, I had written up some report and I had used the spell check which kept on throwing up Inkatha as miss-spelt and I had got it (the computer) to insert and I had transposed the 'h' at some point. John Wright's first comment was that Inkatha was miss-spelt throughout, and I felt so awful about such a silly mistake, but after that I was very careful that when John Wright was going to look at anything everything was spelt correctly.

Mary: We thought that we had no experience of the sort of research that you were doing so we needed that reference group to guide us as employers, and I think it worked reasonably well.

Anne: I think it was an excellent process, I really do. I think that if I had just been let loose the end product would not have been as good as it was. That reference group was really important. I did worry about them because I didn't experience the reference group in the way I experienced being in Sash, but that was because it was a very serious thing – it was about making sure that the research was rigorous and so they weren't a support group for me, they were a reference group, which was fine and they were good people. And, I really felt that they were very helpful. The whole thing felt to me at the time that it had been really well thought through, and subsequent to that I have modeled other research projects on that because it made sense.

Mary: That's fantastic. Anne - security police –were you ever harassed?

Anne: I wasn't ever. I found them very threatening. Often when I went out into the field, and I always went with other people, they were very much a presence and they were often quite threatening, but I never felt personally harassed by them. You know, I often heard stories of other people's experiences but the only time I ever felt personally threatened was actually by Inkatha people, not by the security police.

Mary: Really? The security police must have known what you were doing.

Anne: I would imagine so, but I never felt it as a personal thing. When we went out there would be security police there and they would tell us to go away, and they would brandish their guns, and that was threatening, but it was what the security police did so I didn't feel that they were out to get me at that kind of personal level. Maybe I was just incredibly lucky.

Mary: I am moving away from that, if you are ready to move away, because you say we employed you for two years and during those years were you integrated into the Sash in other ways? I remember you at a conference in Johannesburg when someone important had just been killed – Skhumbuzo ?

Anne: Ngwenya. Ja, there were actually a number of conferences. Very shortly after I got here there was a conference here which was held at Denison Residence.

Mary: Oh, yes.

Anne: I remember going to that when I had only been here for about three weeks, but I felt I needed to say what I thought was going on in the violence because somebody had said something, I can't remember who it was, that made me think that they weren't understanding the involvement of the security police in particular. I remember talking about it in that meeting and afterwards thinking – I've only been here for three weeks, what do I know? But somebody said that they were really impressed that I had managed to talk about it with such authority and get it right – it may have been Fidela (Fouche) who said that. At that point I felt - I am on the right track here, managing to read the things I need to read, and meet the people I need to meet.

Almost from the beginning I did become involved in Sash. I think there was a hell of a lot of pressure on me to do this, I don't think it was just a natural thing but I ended up being involved in, not just the committee of Sash, but the Environment Group, that Fidela headed up, and then there was Gender Group and we produced that Rape booklet.

Mary: And the Constitution booklet.

Anne: Then there was the Rape Education Action Project (REAP) that we did, so there were lots of things. I remember Ann Strode, Gail Wannenburg and myself sitting together in some meeting where we had to find a date to meet the following week and our diaries were full of Sash stuff. The three of us collectively realised that Sash had pretty much become our lives.

Mary: I think it had become a lot of people's lives.

Anne: But it was good – I enjoyed it and I found it a place where I felt very much at home. I had been involved in Earth Life Africa in Cape Town and so when I moved to Pietermaritzburg I made contact with the Earth Life Africa people and Fidela's involvement in that, and her wanting to start a Sash environment group, was a really nice thing. It was bringing together a lot of the things that I really felt about.

Up until that point, although I'd had quite strong views about women and women's rights, I don't think I had articulated that as a feminism and I think I was very much encouraged to do

that when I came and worked for Sash. So, I engaged a lot more with it as a theory and a philosophy and that was really good as well. It allowed me to do a lot of things that I was already interested in and in a bit more of a systematic way so it did really, for a while, become my life.

Mary: Anne, I am interested in your talking about that gender group because at that time Sash in Maritzburg was very feminist and it wasn't totally approved of.

Anne: I had a very strong feeling of the Midlands Sash being a little bit of an outsider in Sash nationally. I felt that we were pretty good and solid in terms of having active members and ticking over, but we were doing some interesting stuff that other Sash branches weren't involved in. I do feel that we were politically a little bit more radical, in terms of the feminist stuff a bit more radical, and in the environmental stuff, too, which was largely Fidela. It wasn't the kind of liberal, do good, let's recycle stuff, it was much more out there and ja, I think we pushed the boundaries, both in Maritzburg and in Sash. I think there were some people who looked at Midlands askance, but I think a lot of Sash really admired us. Some of the oldies were maybe a bit dubious.

Mary: I think they were a bit concerned that maybe we had moved away from the real Sash principles.

Anne: Yes, I think that we probably had but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Also, the protests that we had – we were protesting against things that other people just weren't prepared to go out in public and do, and although they might have supported us, they weren't prepared to stick their necks out and we did. Some of the things that we were protesting against other parts of the Sash weren't, or maybe didn't even know about. And that was clear in the very first conference about the violence. Sash people knew that there was this problem of violence but they didn't understand it, and I think that we helped them to begin to recognise that it wasn't what was being portrayed in the press.

Mary: You obviously played a huge role in that. I don't know that we would have managed to change that perception as well as you did because you were right in there.

Anne: And it was my job which helps. All the other things that we were involved in took a lot of time and energy, but for me the violence was what I was doing so I could give a lot of time and attention to it.

Mary: You have already answered a lot of these questions so I am just having a quick look at them. The work here, for example, was different from anywhere else and you have just talked about it.

Anne: Yes, but that was the work I was doing, the work that Sash was doing was obviously bigger than me, including the work that the Advice Office was doing, and the ways in which Sash was raising issues and putting things on the agenda in that strange period, a period of opening up.

I was actively wanting to leave the job that I was doing in Cape Town at the point when the ANC was unbanned and it looked like change was going to happen. At that point the Democratic Party started insisting that the staff join the Party and many of us were not supporters of the Party. We were doing the work because we felt the work was important, but we weren't politically supporters of the Party and that got quite nasty. For me it was about that period of what gets talked about nationally for the future. How do we begin to talk about the real issues?

I think Sash played a fairly consistent role in making those issues public and they weren't always the issues that were already out. They weren't necessarily the things that the Weekly Mail was publishing because it was the much more hidden stuff, and that's what the Advice Offices did so brilliantly; to say here are the real issues – they are issues around poverty, they are issues around disempowerment, and they are issues around rural people being ignored. I think that was really critical.

Mary: Of course, that's why Sash was such a success because information came from Advice Offices, and it was real information about people talking about their lives.

Anne: That was critical. From all of those other organizations who were saying things what Sash said was rooted in what it knew, and it knew it from Advice Offices or from the research that it got people to do, like me. I was not the only researcher employed at that time. Sash could speak from a position of authority because it had the empirical evidence to back it up and that was very powerful.

Mary: And, it still is. The Sash that exists today is very different but any information that comes from it is based on fact.

Anne: I agree. Shall we talk a bit about the Sash closing?

Mary: Yes, that was my next question. How did you feel? Were you at that conference (1995)?

Anne: I was at that conference.

Mary: So was I and I am interested in how you felt.

Anne: I remember us going to that conference and for Midlands Sash it was a very traumatic thing because I think we were as exhausted as everyone else, possibly even more exhausted, but we were ticking over. Although I don't know, because I wasn't involved in the volunteer

side of the Advice Offices, and the issues about volunteers not knowing what was actually going on in the work that was being done. There was a bit of a fracture between the volunteers and the staff in terms of management understanding the real issues. My feeling was that we were still a fairly active branch compared to what was the case in some of the other branches. In some of the other branches there really were a couple of die-hards and that was pretty much it. I remember meeting in the staff room in the New Arts Block when two women, Janet Shapiro and somebody else who had been commissioned to do...

Mary: Oh yes, Marian Nel and Janet Shapiro.

Anne: They had been commissioned to do an evaluation and then present it to us. They said the volunteer bit should close down and people were quite upset. There were probably more people at that meeting than we had had for a while and although people were upset there was a lot of recognition that maybe this was the time to do it. For me the overriding thing was the exhaustion – it wasn't about whether you needed a Sash any more. In fact, that was the weird thing about that whole conversation over that entire period, because it was a good few months that this thing was debated. There was never a sense of we are no longer needed, our job is not an important one, it was more that we can't sustain this level of volunteers and we are exhausted. We are suffering from burn-out and things have changed but never a real hard-line position of we have done what we came to do, fantastic, so let's close up shop, good for us, the job is done. I remember a lot of arguments about the fact that this was a most crucial time to continue. Then there was that very emotional conference in Johannesburg to make that decision and everyone was very emotional about making it but it did seem like the only decision to be made. I hated it, the decision, I thought it was the wrong decision, but I completely understood. I think people were very tired, and there was an optimism which I was never convinced was a real optimism, it was more a discourse of optimism that things would now be better than they were, and we won't have to fight that hard. It was there but I'm not convinced that people really believed it, I think it might have been a way of making it feel a little bit better.

Mary: This is not in the questions, but wasn't there a sense that it was no longer appropriate for a white women's organisation to carry on?

Anne: Ja, you are right there was quite a hard thing around that. There was a lot of discussion about that, and a lot of people I know remember that meeting we had here, where this was talked about and it was suggested that we just open the organization up (to women of all races). People said we wouldn't be able to because it has always been open, perhaps not always, and people wouldn't join us.

Mary: Other women were not joining the Sash, they were joining the ANC Women's League, and various other women's organizations. I think the Sash was seen by many of those young women as quite a fuddy-duddy organization, an unfortunate perception but I think it was there.

Anne: I think it was. Also, in that whole period that we had just gone through a lot of people were just waiting for the ANC to be unbanned. I never understood why it was an either/or because the Sash never presented itself as a political party, but it kind of ended up like that, it was a weird situation.

Mary: What are you saying?

Anne: It ended up that you either joined Sash or you joined the ANC. If you were going to join something it would be the ANC Women's League, not Sash, and I don't know why it ended up being either/or. I do remember us being involved in the early days of the Women's Coalition when the whole Women's Charter was being drawn up – Sash was quite involved in that.

Mary: And in voter education.

Anne: Ja, lots of voter education. But, the Women's Coalition was an interesting thing because there weren't that many women's organisations around at that time. There were some political parties that had wings to them, the Women's League or whatever. People sometimes said that the Western Cape was otherwise, but at that time it was the Midlands that was thought to be otherwise and strange, because we insisted here that women joined the Women's Coalition in their individual capacities and not as representatives of an organisation precisely because of the Inkatha, ANC, UDF conflicts.

Mary: And it worked.

Anne: Yes, it worked. We could never have done it any other way. But Black Sash was always an entity even though women were there as individuals; there was a very clear "Sashness".

Mary: Anne, you have said so much about your relationship with Sash that I don't think we need to look at it, but, looking back now, what did you gain and what did you leave?

Anne: I think I gained an incredible amount. I think it was an extraordinary experience on a whole lot of levels. I think at the level of my work it was a really good experience of doing research in a very supportive environment and feeling like that research was not just being done for the sake of it but it was part of a bigger plan – it was a very positive experience from that point of view. I made fantastic professional contacts as a result of that. I ended up here (University of KwaZulu Natal), for 16 years now, because of the link with John Aitchison and because of the fact that he became aware of me as a researcher, and offered me work. I talked earlier about how it was a very good model for a research project, having a reference group to

guide it and it was the model I used when we did the Women's Handbook which you might remember was initially something that Sash was going to take on but we just didn't have the capacity to do it.

At a personal level in terms of my own growth, I came to think in a much more feminist way and became much more aware of feminism as not just the way you live your life but as a more theoretical, academic area. It was really a very important time. I learned a lot about managing, and about relationships. Where I had been before as a worker it had always been very clear that I was a worker, but in Sash it was much more complicated because I was a worker, but I wasn't treated as a worker and because of the way that the volunteerism thing worked I got involved in Sash on the Committee so that it was much more convoluted and complex and yet it was never an issue. I think that was because there was always an understanding in Sash, a thing that I think we are missing now, that every person matters, and every person must be treated with respect, whoever you are. Whether you are a worker in the organisation or a person coming through the door from a remote rural area trying to access a pension, or the manager, or whatever, there was an ethos of respect. I think I learned about how that can work, and that it can be a really good space. It means you can work well and be productive without someone breathing down your neck all day. I was trusted and it was pretty extraordinary really. I went from Sash to the National Land Committee, about which we will say no more, but it was a very different experience. Obviously, it helped in finding my place in Pietermaritzburg, having come not knowing anybody, and after two years feeling that I pretty much knew everybody. I would say that it really did a great deal for me on a lot of different levels.

As to what I did for Sash, I'm not so sure. I think the research mattered because we managed not just to ensure that Sash knew what was going on, but Sash was then able to feed that into bigger processes. Maybe if someone else had done the research it would have worked out just as well. I do feel that the Women's Handbook, although it wasn't a Sash project but was originally conceptualised as a Sash project, was a really good project, and maybe that was something I did that I wouldn't have done if it hadn't been for Sash. So, maybe that was also a useful thing for Sash; maybe that was a little thing that I did for Sash.

I haven't been involved in Sash since we shut down the volunteers and that was because there wasn't any obvious way to be involved and I'm not sure that I would have wanted to be involved in an entirely different way. There is a big distance between myself and Sash now. I have felt through this whole period that it is a hell of a pity that there isn't a Sash in the way there was, even in those early years when maybe we were optimistic.

I remember acutely going to Namibia during the period of Namibia's first elections and meeting a man who was head of what was their equivalent of the Legal Resources Centre, I think it was called the Legal Advice Centre. We met him in the days leading up to the election when he

spoke about how incredibly criticised the Legal Advice Centre had been for taking a political stand because it had aligned itself with Swapo and there had been a lot of criticism from the public and funders because of this stand. I was then back in Namibia for the independence celebrations and that same man told us that they had again been criticised, because after the elections Swapo had come to him and said, Let's talk about your relationship with government and he had said, no, we will continue as we were, our role is to keep you honest now that you are the government. That really hit home. That was the kind of role that I thought Sash could have played.

Governments are always about compromise, and power corrupts, and there's always somebody who needs to hold you to account. Maybe it wasn't Sash's job to do that as a group of white women, but it was somebody's job and there wasn't anyone else doing it, and there isn't anyone else doing it with that kind of moral authority. The only other example I have is Desmond Tutu who is just clearly ethical in his approach, and that was what Sash was; that complete commitment to what was right, what was morally correct, not legally correct, but morally principled. I always felt that it was a real pity that that part of Sash didn't continue.

At this point the tape ran out and Mary thanked Anne for the interview.

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