

Natal Midlands Black Sash

MARY KLEINENBERG interviewed by Alleyn Diesel
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Interview for the records of the Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu Natal.

This is Mary Kleinenberg being interviewed by Al Diesel

Al: Hi Mary, would you like to say something about yourself first – important and significant things about your background?

Mary: Not much really, I was born & educated in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and came to S.A. in the late seventies, having lived in England & Malawi, and I was always interested in politics and human rights. That's enough!

Al: When did you join the Black Sash and why did you do this?

Mary: I joined the B.S. in about 1982 after working in the A.O. for a while. There was this sense that injustice could be publicized and in the end things could be changed, though I did not really believe the country would become democratic in my lifetime. Some of the actions of the Government of the time were so outrageous that it just seemed like the right thing to do - join the Sash.

Al: In Pietermaritzburg?

Mary: Yes

Al: Can you remember some of the people in key positions in the Natal Midlands Branch when you joined, particularly through the seventies?

Mary: Well, I would be talking about the eighties and nineties, and when I joined Pessa Weinberg was Chairperson and Paula Krynauw took over from her. Other people I remember are Joan Kerrchhoff, Joy Roberts, Fidela Fouche, Cara Pretorious, Didi Stephens, Hazel Barnes, Jenny Clarence, Mary Nathanson, Pat Dunne, Jane Worsnip, Al Diesel, Fiona Bulman, Lorenza Cowling, Jo Stilau, and over the years many others. Pat Merrett, of course, is associated mainly with the Advice Office, although she did take part in Sash activities.

Al: And did you ever work in the Advice Office and who were the key people there?

Mary: Yes, my association with the B.S. started when I volunteered to work in the A.O. in about 1980. I was told to phone Pat Merrett which I did, and she said to me "It's all very well to want to work in the Advice Office, but what can you do?" She became a very close friend, but I was

certainly very intimidated by that response. Pat was Convener of the Advice Office for many years, and really it was her dedication that kept it going. I worked on Saturday mornings, in the Advice Office, until it was decided in 1986 to close over week-ends. I was treasurer of the Advice Office Committee for a long time and chaired it for a while.

Key people in the Advice Office were Pat (Merrett), of course, Pat Dunne, Gay Spiller, Gay MacCormack, Juliet Armstrong, Sarah Carlisle, and Maureen Wright, who worked in the Advice Office for many years but was never a member of Black Sash. Ah, and there was also Ian Calder who worked in the Advice Office as a volunteer but wasn't a member of Sash, of course.

I wanted to go and talk about Victoria Nyide, or 'Busi', who was employed as an interpreter in 1975 and worked in the A.O. for 25 years, later becoming a paralegal. The first Co-ordinator we employed in this region was Jennie Bowen who started work in 1986. She was followed by Clare Kerchhoff and then there was Ann Strode, who now lectures law at UKZN, and lastly Ashnie Padarath who was still there when the organization closed down and Advice Offices were run by the National Office rather than volunteers.

Al: What year was that?

Mary: Ninety Four.

Mary: In 1980 (correction – it was actually 1990) we had an Advice Office conference in 'Maritzburg - they did take place every few years. Jenny de Tolly was National Chair of the Sash at the time and she came here to talk to members, and see what was going on. We ended the conference with a Peace Vigil, all holding candles as it got dark, along what was then Commercial Road (now Chief Albert Luthuli). It was a huge vigil and, I thought, rather grand.

Al: Would you like to comment on the work of the A.O. and perhaps how it changed over the years?

Mary: Well, I think it is important to say that the Black Sash gained a lot of credibility through Advice Office work because the problems that we tackled were very real and came from people seeking help. The information collected was fed into the advocacy work where campaigns were, and still are, successfully put together. As well as the one-on-one advice-giving, volunteers monitored pension pay points because there was often a lot of corruption, even then, and people needed to know how to go about putting it right.

I think that the work of the A.O. changed after we appointed the first National Co-ordinator which was in ...

Al: Year?

Mary: Oh dear – sorry I can't remember (it was, in fact, 1993), but certainly after that it was run on a professional basis which meant that paralegals were better paid and, in general service

conditions were better, and certainly more uniform. When volunteers ran Advice Offices, employees were paid whatever the region could afford which in Maritzburg was very little.

As time has passed, there were fewer individuals seeking daily help so the staff did a lot of "outreach work" which meant that they went into communities, when invited, to talk about socio-economic conditions, rights, and how people could improve their lives.

I have listed some of the problems encountered in the Advice Office, they were things like:

- Delays in the processing of identity documents;
- Problems accessing UIF
- Problems accessing pensions
- Injuries-at-work compensation
- Poor people simply looking for food
- People not knowing where to go for whatever help they needed.
- We even had abused women coming into the A.O.

If we weren't able to assist, we had lists of people that we could refer them to so they could go to the right place for help.

I think it's important to note that it was a policy to try to encourage people to help themselves, so instead of doing everything for them we would facilitate their writing of letters and get them to telephone, and only intervene if the person really couldn't do any more.

Not long ago, in 2003, the Witness was reporting really awful conditions at the Dept of Social Development where people were applying for grants and getting themselves registered. So we got a group of eight former members together to monitor this, gathered quite a lot of information which went to the Dept and to the Advice Office. We think it did help because we noted that some improvements took place.

In 2012 it was decided to phase out one-on-one advice giving due to diminishing numbers of clients and our dependence on international aid which is not viable, really. We have established a very useful help line and, although we are short of resources, we will continue to offer skills training and educational material in the field of human rights, and we will encourage communities to monitor, record and analyze their own conditions.

AI: And the help line is national, is it?

Mary: It is national, ya.

AI: And what was the Black Sash actually doing when you joined, and why was this considered to be particularly important?

Mary: We were holding weekly protest stands, sometimes held public meetings about current issues and wrote small booklets - "You and...." booklets that people could just pop into a pocket.

These were useful, clarifying issues and giving information to people who needed to know what to do about certain things.

Al: Give examples of the sort of things.

Mary: Well, there was *You and Debt*, and I'll get to the book we wrote in a moment. I think that the organization was important because we were protesting against injustice, unjust legislation, and trying to inform the public about how bad it was because the whole apartheid system was horribly unjust.

Examples of some of the protest stands that I can remember, you might remember others, were: Corruption & Secrecy; Bannings; Police Death Squads, I remember in that one asking 'Who killed David Webster?'; Emergency Restrictions; Natal Conflict; Capital Punishment, which we were against; Children in Prison, Violence against Women and many more that I don't recall. Do you?

Al: We did a Free Mandela one didn't we? And, the police were very upset about it.

Mary: Yes, we did.

Al: Can you remember any important Black Sash achievements while you were active?

Mary: Well, I think there were considerable achievements, but I'll try and go through them. We were invited to many women's events, to talk or just be there. We had a high profile in the City, produced some booklets, held many public meetings, were invited to talk at the Chris Hani memorial.

Al: Where was that held?

Mary: In 1993 in Freedom Park. Freedom Square, it is now- it used to be Market Square. Fidela Fouche & I wrote a story about that which was published in the Alan Paton Centre *Concord*, their magazine, so it is available. We also took part in Women's Day celebrations in the Lotus Hall and in Edendale and we held a very successful mini Malibongwe Conference in 1990.

Also in 1989 we were invited to take part in the Women's Day Celebration at Wadley Stadium (Edendale), and we had a well known feminist theologian staying with us, Rosemary Radford Ruether (from the US), and she talked to the women which went down very well. It was an extremely festive occasion.

In 'Maritzburg we were the first group to become involved with street children, and in 1989 we arranged a campaign with a petition which resulted in some children being moved into a house. On Christmas day in 1989 we took footballs and food to where the children used to meet, in the vacant ground on the corner of Victoria Road and Chapel Street.

Al: The lovely woman who was the manager of Woolworths food shop gave us mountains of wonderful food that had exceeded its sell by date.

Mary: That's quite right.

Also in '89 we took part in a huge Beach Protest in Durban - beaches were segregated at the time.

In 1990 we were invited to join the women's march in Edendale to present a petition calling for peace to the Plessislaar police station. A number of us were arrested – I do remember Jane Worsnip, Louise Hall, Clare Kerchhoff, Anton & Bridget Krone and myself – there's a photograph of us in the police van in the Alan Paton archives.

In 1992 we handed in a petition to the Loop Street Police Station asking for impartial policing. I was asked to go and give it to the Commander, and I remember being walked along many corridors and being quite nervous about who I was to see and whether I'd find my way out again.

In 1992 Geina Mhlope put on her play "Have you Seen Zandile?" (In the Hexagon theatre) and she gave the Black Sash the opening night to raise funds.

Some-time in the nineties we organized a huge protest after police had surrounded St George's Cathedral in Cape Town, trapping protesters. At our protest we had women from many organizations joining us to make a ring around the Anglican Cathedral.

Al: In Maritzburg, at the top of Church Street?

Mary: Yes, and we carried posters about police brutality. It wasn't a very dignified protest – there was much singing and dancing before we settled down to a serious, quiet circle around the Cathedral. Those are some of my memories of things that we were doing.

Al: And during all this time and activity were you ever harassed by the Security Police or others?

Mary: The Security Police were always around and I must say I often thought what a waste of resources. At protest stands they would move along the line and ask, by name, if we still lived and worked in the same place - they had our addresses and where we worked.

Al: They videoed every protest.

Mary: I was about to say they also took still and video photos, some from the back, and it was very intimidating, and I do know that some members felt weak in the knees and couldn't take part in these protests. I don't think they had film in the camera, but anyway they might have. They also drove up and down the road taking registration numbers from cars when we had meetings and also at public meetings. So they were always around – there was always a feeling of intimidation.

Al: I remember many nights when there were strange cars, large American cars like the Security Police drove, just parked outside our house for hours on end which I found really dreadful.

Mary: Absolutely.

Al: And of course some of that harassment was in connection with protest stands, so do you want to talk about taking part in protest stands and how you found that, and were you ever charged for taking part in an illegal gathering and what happened there because there was quite a lot of harassment around that, and arrests?

Mary: Yes. Fidela Fouche, (you) Al Diesel and myself ended up organizing and making the posters for all the protest stands. And, I think it is import to say that during the late eighties when there was a State of Emergency, we weren't allowed to stand, but the Natal Midlands Black Sash was one of the only regions that continued to have joint stands because Cecil Dicks, the Chief Magistrate in Pietermaritzburg, gave us permission. Each week we were required to see him with an outline of our proposed protest to get his permission to hold the stand opposite the City Hall. The rest of the country couldn't get this permission, but we continued the tradition here, and I often wondered if he was quietly sympathetic - to give us the permission was pretty amazing.

In 1988 twelve of us were arrested for holding what was called an illegal gathering. We had our permission to stand for ½ an hour, which we had done when a Witness photographer asked if we would quickly re-group and pose, holding our posters, for a photo. We did this. The Security Police swooped down, gathered us up and took us with them. (Arrested us) We were taken to a prefab somewhere along the Edendale Road to be processed, which involved filling in forms, finger printing and mug shots. At first we were a bit silly about the forms, writing all sorts of nonsense where it asked if we had any disabilities or markings on our bodies. However, when a burly chap waved his gun at us and threatened to shoot if we did not behave, we settled down!

The case was taken to Court and Michael Cowling defended us *pro bono*. The Magistrate eventually threw it out, said it was a waste of his and police time, but it was stressful for all concerned.

On another occasion Al Diesel was conducting a single stand when she was arrested and carted off in a police van. Fidela Fouche, who was monitoring the stand, wasn't told where she was being taken. Again, Michael Cowling helped by rushing around trying to find where she was. But Loop Street and Alexandra Road (Police Stations) said they knew nothing about the arrest. We were getting frantic by the time she was located at Loop Street two or three hours later. The police had taken her to their barracks (in Oribi Village) and left her sitting in the back of the van while they showered. It got cold and dark, and she was terrified. No charges were laid, so it seems it was pure intimidation. Do you want to say something about it? - it was after all you, not me.

Al: They threatened me with a 90 Day Detention, because during the State of Emergency they'd said there couldn't be gatherings of more than three people, I think. So we had arranged for the two-people stands so that one held a poster and the other monitored in case something went wrong, as it did in this case. They were very threatened by this. I was very roughly handled and

there was a lot of very threatening talk, and then they took me off to Loop Street where there were mutterings of 90 Day Detention, and Michael Cowling was not very encouraging because he thought they could get serious about it, but in the end he persuaded them, and their bluster turned out to be nothing more than that.

Mary: Now, there was another incident when Marie Dyer was not carted off, because when the Security Police came to her she said, "Well, I'm just packing up anyway" and she went, and they left her.

Al: How well did the Natal Midland branch relate to other branches in the country? How often did you meet and when?

Mary: We had regular annual conferences, so we did meet people involved in other regions. I think that we formed very good relationships with many of them. I do remember the first conference that I attended in Johannesburg because I met such iconic figures as Sheena Duncan, Mary Burton and Di Oliver, and I honestly thought I was listening to some of the best minds in the country, they were amazing women. In '93 the National Conference was held in Pietermaritzburg and actually that's when we appointed a National Coordinator – I couldn't remember the date earlier. I think we made a jolly good job of it, we all worked very hard to get it together. Delegates stayed with members of Sash or at Dennison Residence at the University of Natal, as it was then. At that time we had another feminist theologian staying with us from England, Ursula King, and she came to evening entertainments, met some of the delegates and said that it had been a great privilege to be part of such a committed group of fearless women. Nice to hear that.

At these National Conferences there was often a bit of tension between Johannesburg and Cape Town because one of them would be voted in as National Headquarters and they certainly vied for the privilege. It was quite interesting to watch - being a small region we weren't involved in that tension.

Al: You mentioned the "You and...." information booklets at bit earlier – tell us about this region which was involved in writing some of them, what they were and how well they were received.

Mary: We formed a women's group in the Sash which was quite interesting, since it was a women's organization, anyway. But we were quite radical at that stage, and we wrote two booklets. The first was *Say No to Rape* written in the early nineties and it was reprinted a few years later as *You and Rape*. We also wrote *You and the Constitution* in 1992. Oh, I said the Rape booklet was written by the Women's Group - in fact both of them were, and some of that women's group had been members of Rape Crisis, so we did have some knowledge - obviously there was more research, and plenty of enthusiasm. In order to write the Constitution booklet we had many meetings with women's groups to explain what a constitution is and to ask them what they would like to see in our new democratic constitution. It was very interesting and stimulating.

Other books that came out of this region much earlier - in fact, in 1974, this region wrote a book called *This is Your City* and it was followed by *Pietermaritzburg in Profile*. They were little booklets talking about what was in Pietermaritzburg.

Al: What sort of things – facilities?

Mary: The difference between facilities for black people and for white people. Then, in 1990, we employed Anne Truluck (now Harley) to research and write about the violence in the Province. Her first job was to update this booklet and she called it *The Fractured City* because that is certainly what it was. She then wrote *No Blood on our Hands* which we thought was an important piece of work, because it showed the way that people had been involved in the violence, very clearly. It looked at business, local government, and the State, in terms of government officials and security forces, and it was a very well-received book. Being exposed to so much violence was very difficult for Anne and we offered her professional counseling, but she chose to meet with Jenny Clarence and me using a wonderful hand-book called *In Our Own Hands*. She found it rather emotional, but very helpful. We met once a week for quite a long time and it helped us, Jenny and me, to understand more, because we had been here during the seven day war and the violence was really horrific.

Al: I think you need to say more about the violence in Natal at that stage, between the ANC and Inkatha and how widespread and terrifying and dreadfully disruptive it was in every one's lives.

Mary: Ya, well it certainly was, and I think what Anne uncovered, although it was fairly clear but not documented, that Inkatha was being fed by the security forces, so the government was fuelling the violence, and so of course it was terrifying. It was kind of non-stop. It was being helped by government officials, by security forces. Ya, very terrifying, and very widespread. You could hardly meet anyone who was not in some way affected by this violence.

Al: I remember that from Scottsville, and from the University buildings, you could often look out towards Edendale, Plessislaar and see great clouds of smoke rising up and hords of warriors, impis, with shields and spears...

Mary: I think that was during the seven days war.

Al: Yes, they were storming across the hillsides, chanting and attacking homes and killing people.

Mary: Yes, but do you know what is interesting, though we need to do more research, but as far as we are aware, and we haven't tested this, but Christopher Merrett and I, looking through Advice Office files, don't think that these people came to the Black Sash Advice Office, people affected by the violence, they went to PACSA and places like that. The Advice office just continued to deal with the same sort of problems which is quite interesting and a bit odd in a way. We did have some, I think, but not hordes of people.

Al: How do you think the work here in the Midlands was different from anywhere else, and do you think that this branch had any influence on other parts of the country?

Mary: Certainly, in my time this Sash was very feminist organization and therefore different - perhaps Cape Town was closest to us in this respect. Because we were so women-centered we became very involved with other women's organizations in the region, and so in much of our work we put women first. I don't think this was altogether approved of by some of our older members and by some of other branches. I think it was accepted that the work we were doing was important, but there was a feeling that maybe it wasn't quite *Sash* work. So yes, we were different, but I don't think in that respect we influenced anybody. As we have already said in our previous discussions, it was also a time of great unrest in KwaZulu Natal and the political violence was absolutely terrible and we were able to report what was going on here, with some accuracy, to other regions. During the 7 day war in 1990 I met every morning, at 7.30 in the Anglican Cathedral, with the Violence Co-ordinating Committee, and what we were doing was discussing what was going on, what information was coming in, what was needed, who could do what to help. So I think we played a very important role, but again I'm not sure that we had much influence on other parts of the country.

Al: But a number of Sash women, Fidela Fouche and Monika Wittenberg, were involved in that Edendale group that went and lived in people's homes, overnight, to monitor what was happening and to help.

Mary: It was called the Imbali Support Group, and actually that was started by PACSA, but a few Sash women did go out and the people of Imbali thought that having a white person in their house did help, and it did seem to, which was very interesting.

Al: So what other specific organizations did Sash work with?

Mary: We worked with The Women's Coalition which later became The Midlands Women's Group, National Council for Women, Women for Peaceful Change, and the ANC Women's League. In fact, I went to Kempton Park (in Johannesburg) where huge numbers of women met in preparation for CODESA, taking what women wanted in the Constitution. I was delegated, not by Sash, but by The Women's Coalition. And in our work with other organizations I was very privileged to meet some remarkable women visitors, largely through Patsy Seethal, an activist in this area. For example, I met Angela Davis, the well known American author; Andra Kumar and Vandana Shiva, who were environmental activists from India; Cheris Kramer, who wrote the Feminist Dictionary; Gayatri Spivak a fierce feminist activist, author and academic, who questioned my presence at a meeting because I was white, and I remember Patsy gave her quite a mouth-full and said she didn't think colour was relevant - she thought what people were doing was relevant.

Al: Now, the membership organization closed in 1995, a year after the first democratic elections, which was a majority resolution of delegates at a special national conference. The Advice Office Trust remained and was renamed The Black Sash Trust to carry on the work of the Black Sash, and so there was a great transition from a volunteer-managed to a professionally managed one. How did you feel about this whole process and the closure of the membership organization?

Mary: Before that big meeting, Marion Nel & Janet Shapiro (consultants from Johannesburg) had done an evaluation of Sash - they'd been all round the Country and I think it became clear that women were exhausted and felt that with the new dispensation that perhaps it was no longer appropriate for a middle class women's organisation to be protesting. Personally, I was very sad, but I could see that it had to end, and I thought that over the years we'd done a great job and could be proud of our achievements. I felt there was a sense that we couldn't sustain the work we were doing on a voluntary basis - we really were very tired and new recruits weren't joining the Sash. There is also the point that we ended up being rather white - probably because women had other avenues, like the ANC Women's League, and I don't think, in the euphoria of the time, we realised how seriously damaging apartheid had been to women of colour. We still thought they might have joined the Sash, but looking back I think that was very unlikely. And so, knowing there would always be work to do, I reluctantly voted for the closure.

It was a difficult decision to say that the new professional organization could carry the Black Sash name, because it was an unknown entity and we were very proud of our name. Since I was a Trustee at the time, and still am, it meant that we, as Trustees, had an important task in making sure that the name was used wisely and carried forward with our principles. So, ya, it was a sad time, but I think it was the right decision.

Al: So, looking back from a distance, how do you feel about your involvement in Sash?

Mary: I am very proud to have been involved in an organization that has such a positive history. I really believe that the Sash played an important role in publicizing some of the horrors of the apartheid system, and even working towards the transformation of South Africa to a democracy. So my overall sense is one of pride.

Al: And an amazing experience, something quite unique to have been involved in.

Mary: Absolutely.

Al: Say something about your relationship with other members of Sash, both Midlands and nationally, and how did this alter your outlook?

Mary: Well, many of the women that I worked with, both locally and nationally, are still good friends, and I think that having the knowledge that I gained through membership of the Sash, and working in the Advice Office, and these friendships, I think they did alter my outlook in the sense that I could never be a complacent white woman.

Al: Ya, how do you want to sum up, what are the most important things you gained from working in the organisation, and perhaps what you were able to contribute toward it?

Mary: I gained a great deal from the organization. I think I became more confident, I learnt a lot about relationships and met and befriended a wide variety of women in this city, and the rest of the country. It was an extraordinary time, and I learnt to work with other people in a way that valued and respected everyone, whatever their background. The Advice Office also gave me

insights into current legislation, like UIF & Workers Compensation. I think I gave an enormous amount of time and energy to the organization, and still give a bit as a Trustee, but I feel extremely honoured to have worked in this organization, and I think perhaps to have gained an understanding of the true meaning of integrity, and personal worth.

Al: Ya, and politics in South Africa, you gained a tremendous amount of knowledge about that. I mean, I keep asking you questions about various aspects of politics in the new South Africa, and you can usually answer, or find out where to get the information. And, I also think the Black Sash was an exercise in many ways (certainly in the Midlands) of feminism in practice.

Mary: Sure. That's very interesting, and I am glad you said that because in fact when I interviewed Ann Harley she said something like that – she still uses the model that we used, employing her in a feminist group, in her teaching at the University because it worked so extremely well. So, that's quiet something to walk away with.

Al: Fantastic. Is there anything else that you have thought of that you want to add.

Mary: No, I don't think so. Thank you.