

Work hard enough, be committed enough, do enough,  
to choose the ways in which we will build a new just  
and peaceful society for our common future.

Sheena Duncan

Text: Mandi Smallhome



# Difficult women

A salute to Sheena Duncan and the Black Sash

One day in 1993, a small group of white women set up a 'practice' polling station in a large tent at the Tweede Oog in Kuruman, surrounded by large swathes of green lawn. We were expecting a few people to turn up to rehearse their roles as new voters; instead, we were amazed as we watched bus after bus pull up and disgorge hundreds of excited people.

Before the first democratic election in South Africa, the Black Sash went out into far-flung areas of the country to ensure that as many citizens as possible had had a

chance to role-play the exercise of going to the polls, and would be able to do so with confidence and joy. This was one such outreach initiative. A long morning followed, with the huge crowd listening carefully and then queuing patiently for their practice run.

At the end of the day, the crowd spilled out onto the lawns and were packed tightly around us. Then they began to toyi-toyi. Underneath me, the ground literally shook as it was pounded by many hundreds of feet. In my ear, one of the leaders shouted,

"We are singing that we love you! You are our heroes!"

I came too late to the Black Sash to be a hero, but the Sash women who protested and lobbied for several decades before I joined certainly were. It was sad to discover that few remembered the Black Sash when one of its most inspiring members, Sheena Duncan, died on 4 May this year.

The Black Sash's role was such that it was singled out by Nelson Mandela in his first speech after his release from Victor