

**Tribute to Sheena Duncan at the Memorial Service held at Regina Mundi, Soweto, on 16 May, 2010.**

It must be strange and fundamentally peculiar or certainly a profound and simple sign of our times that I, a radical for social and economic transformation of society and, for that matter, a pragmatic black consciousness woman would today stand before you as the chairperson of the Black Sash Trust. I owe a debt to Sheena for having developed a special and constructive relationship spanning close to 30 years. I stand to pay tribute to Sheena, a mentor, colleague, and family friend. The Sash under Sheena's able and dedicated leadership was able to transform itself, adapt and remained relevant and a thorn in the flesh of unaccountable bureaucracy and power.

Scribes have written many moving obituaries about Sheena, which I endorse. We share a sense of deep loss and grief at her untimely parting. South Africa was reminded about the humane legacy of Sheena and the selfless contribution of her generation. The generation that adopted proactive actions in their quest for and commitment to the ideals and values that are a solid foundation for lasting democracy, the sanctity of life and creation, freedom and equality, and the need for coexistence and shared destiny of the human race. We have shared a deep commitment to and played diverse roles in a seemingly daunting struggle for social and economic justice in our beloved and benighted country. Sheena strongly believed in the efficacy of all her work and that the oppression of one by another does not in essence benefit anyone. Human suffering and exploitation robs all of us of a shared humanity.

Sheena was a bold testimony to Nelson Mandela's words in the book, Long Road to Freedom:

"I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom

is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow mindedness. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity”.

Apartheid was dehumanizing not just for the oppressed but for the oppressor too as it robbed them of their humanity and allowed them to dehumanize the oppressed all in the name of preserving privilege and untold wealth based on race.

In our long association I have closely observed and embraced a firm conviction that Sheena Duncan was not a naïve liberal. Hers was a liberating and empowering mission. I believed that she was not a top-down missionary that delivered services to black people. I have the experience of her working collaboratively with Black and White people for change. I have over decades perceived in her a growing confidence and belief in the ability of Black human rights activist within the para-legal advice office movement in this country.

Sheena was at ease exercising her deep spirituality and faith in ecumenical contexts. She affirmed through practical examples her conviction and belief that all people are equal before God irrespective of race, gender, culture or ethnicity. Her values-based activism found expression in active opposition to apartheid and bureaucrats that implemented apartheid laws and policies. This was her way of reclaiming her own shared humanity and dignity.

Sheena was not a person to stand on the sidelines while injustice was inflicted on fellow human beings. She was always engaged in humanizing racist institutions in state, church and business. She understood and ensured that she draws and confronts leaders in all sectors to act in good faith as responsible citizens. Sheena was effective and very productive in her work for she always identified allies and roped in their resources, skills and knowledge.

I must pay special tribute to her foresight and evolving work and the timely transition within the Black Sash. The Black Sash Trust remains opposed to all forms of injustice. We shall as a fitting recognition to the fundamental values of the Sash continue to engage with issues of poverty, exclusion and marginalization of the powerless and victims of mal-development in our society. We, therefore, challenge old members and new associates of the Sash to find ways and means for active engagement with government, business and civil society using the law and in particular the Constitution as a tool for promoting equitable access to rights and responsibility that is part of the life of free men and women.

We have been informed that Sheena "died peacefully." Yes that might be so if the Black Sash were to remain firmly on the side of the poor and the marginalized. We need not talk for or on behalf of the poor and suffering but to engage and work tirelessly with them and enable them to effectively participate in processes and structures that impact on their life. The Sash needs to raise the standard and lobby for the realization of the values and principles that promise to make all of us truly free and contented South Africans. The Sash must enjoin itself to communities and work for the truth, articulate the founding values of our society and boldly speak truth to power.

Our task is not enviable. What this means is that it is inevitable for the Sash to continue, where Sheena, her mother and associates left, to address the state and the private sector on how practices, laws and policies adversely affect the poor and the powerless among us. Where they are manifestly inequitable and unjust, the Black Sash will engage with both the private and public sectors in critical constructive social action and informed debate. Litigation will remain necessary. This will be done in order to save our economic and political system from grave destructive manifestations.

While the Sash has transformed itself to a professional human rights-advocacy organization it remains committed to knowledge-based social action and rights-based activism. We believe that the strength and vibrancy of the organization lies in its ability to organize and build working relationships and social networks across society and diverse groups of citizens committed to a lasting genuine democracy, 'a better life for all', and a shared humanity with regard to all human beings.

In conclusion, as I pay tribute to SHEENA I would also want to pay tribute to all those women and their families that have chosen to share in social solidarity with the oppressed and exploited. I think it is also fitting for us all to pay tribute to the legacy and memory of one of the eminent leaders of this land, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, who worked, shared and believed to the end in the vision for a free, open and fair society.

May the legacy of our beloved be entrusted to our next generations from whom we have borrowed the future.

Thank you

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