

Memorial event at Black Sash National Office on the passing of Sheena Duncan

Dear Trustees, Colleagues, Friends of the Black Sash

- *Elroy Paulus, Black Sash Advocacy Programme Manager*

On behalf of the Black Sash staff, may we again express our sincerest condolences to the Duncan family. I am DEEPLY honoured this evening to have been asked to say a few words on behalf of the current staff of the Black Sash in honour of the late Sheena Duncan.

A fellow Trustee (who will remain anonymous) commented earlier today that it would be nice for the “new generation” to say a few words. I am not sure whether I qualify for either category – given that I neither had the honour of personally meeting the late Sheena Duncan, nor meeting the perceived requirements of the “new generation”, given abundant grey hairs and spectacles.

Seriously though, I have never witnessed the memory and tributes to someone who has passed on reverberate and continue in so many places, by so many different people, for so long. It is claimed that the philosopher George Berkeley said "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? In the eulogy for Sheena Duncan by Ethel Walt in Johannesburg a few days ago, she compared the passing of the late Sheena Duncan to the falling of an oak tree – a pin oak tree to be exact. A unique feature of a Pin oak is the **retention of leaves through the winter on juvenile tissue**. I am confident that her legacy and memory will remain reverberate and be heard for many years.

Even though I have neither seen nor heard Sheena Duncan in person, I am awestruck that her vision and passion for justice, for the poor and her belief in hard work has been embraced by so many people, from all walks of life – moreover this by one, even 2 generations later (and counting). The reverberations of that unique fallen oak tree, seems to have spanned generations and different contexts of struggle. Much of her life was during the apartheid years, yet we have been inspired by her life (and others) to do the same in a very different framework and context.

Just how present in our collective consciences the memory of Sheena’s life and work is can be witnessed amongst other by the following comments by our staff.

Xolela May, from the Knysna Black Sash office said “to us as the new generation of the Black Sash I must say it with confidence that indeed it has been an honour and privilege to be associated with the person of this caliber. We will always honour her Spirit by continuing with what Sheena has stood for, for many years in her life. It is our humble submission to the world that Sheena’s legacy we will continue with diligence..... For us, for having her we say “it has been a blessing” and may her soul rest in peace.

Black Sash Advocacy Programme Manager, **Ratula Beukman** said “It’s a sad loss for us all but especially for the family of Sheena. My thoughts are with you all. It is a significant and awesome

task to walk in the footsteps of this great leader, Sheena Duncan. We take that task seriously and continue the fight for dignity and fulfillment of basic human rights of all who live in South Africa.

What struck me too was from where tributes poured inAmongst other [Nic Dawes](#), Editor of the Mail and Guardian (who worked as a journalist in Parliament for years) said Sheena Duncan's death is a moment to reflect on how civil society activism and individual commitment can claim space back from politicians.

Alexa Lane, Eastern Cape Provincial Director said last week, at the opening of the first of 9 provincial consultative workshops on health system reform that she wondered whether we should have a moment of silence to respect the passing of Sheena. We did not, because that was not what Sheena would have wanted. Instead, we would best honour Sheena with the work at hand, and so we did just that.

In this morning's Cape Times, **Judith February of IDASA** writes about the "debt of gratitude to anti-apartheid risk-takers Duncan and Slabbert" – referring to the recent passing on of Frederick van Zyl Slabbert – co-founder of IDASA. In subsequent SMS's between her and myself regarding this article, we reflected how our organisations were united in grief about people who are remembered as larger than life characters. Yet they are remembered by their small, seemingly insignificant acts of kindness.

I wish also to convey apologies and warmest greetings from my local Anglican church, from the interim Rector of St. Aidan's Parish, Father Louis Bank – who in the 1970's and 1980's was working for the Western Province Council of Churches as secretary of the Church and Society Committee. He struggled to get this Committee going but recalled warmly of how the Black Sash breathed life and energy to this work when they supported it.... "What a strong and courageous champion we had in Sheena!" he wrote this afternoon – "greetings to Mary, Di et al".

In the Old Testament there is a verse that reads "and they understood the times in order to know what to do." Sheena appears to have this gift in her nature for her generation and even beyond. We will miss her, even though we did not know her – lala ngoxolo uMaDuncan....woman of valour, whose price is far above rubies....and whose children (and followers) will rise up and call you blessed.".....

Thank you