

Eulogy for Sheena Duncan – St George’s Cathedral, Parktown, Johannesburg - 10th May, 2010.

Delivered by Ethel Walt.

May I begin by expressing our sincere condolences to the Duncan family, and my thanks for affording me the honour of addressing you this morning. I am humbled by the thought that I that I speak for all my colleagues in the Black Sash, as well as the other organisations she worked for, the Church, and the millions of black people whose lives she changed for the better.

As I stood in Sheena's bedroom last week, I looked out of the window at the enormous pin oak tree in her garden, and I thought "Sheena was like that". It spreads its branches wide in every direction for all who wish to find shelter there. That was what Sheena did. She opened her home to all who were in need of shelter. Continuing the analogy further, you can never measure the height of a tree until it has fallen. Now that Sheena has gone, we are able to appreciate fully what a towering presence she was in our lives, someone who was truly larger than life. One instinctively looked up to her, the commanding voice of authority. With her clear and simple vision of what was right and wrong, she was the moral compass which guided all our activities, and in every sense of the word, she was a profound influence on all our lives.

Sheena was possessed of a brilliant brain, a hugely compassionate heart, and an unwavering moral code of honesty and decency. With no formal legal training, she turned herself into a first class lawyer, or so I have been told by our legal friends. She studied the important legal bills thoroughly, read Hansard, and scoured the weekly Government Gazettes. Coupled with her day to day observation of the way in which apartheid laws impacted on the lives of black people, she developed an encyclopaedic knowledge of the law. She was able to speak and write with complete authority on apartheid law, every word of which was solidly grounded in unassailable facts and figures.

The meticulously detailed Advice Office reports from our office and from others around the country, became a source of information for all Advice Office workers to share, as well as for journalists, academics, diplomats, and - it is rumoured - by government officials themselves who used them to assess the effectiveness of their laws. Her sharp mind was able to find legal loopholes in influx control laws, which could be challenged in court, and led to such landmark decisions as the Khomani and Rikhoto judgements, which extended urban residence rights to the families of black workers. This patient, unrelenting chipping away at the Pass Laws led to their eventual abolition in July 1986. I remember barging in to a Khotso House board meeting to break the news to Sheena, and who can ever forget the celebration that followed!

In her pursuit of social justice, no cause was ever too small or too big for her, and once she engaged with an issue she pursued it relentlessly. She had boundless energy and drive, worked punishingly long hours, and never took no for an answer. If one approach failed, she would try another, but she never gave up! It was an entrenched principle of the Black

Sash that we never broke the law. or encouraged others to do so. But Sheena could always find ingenious ways of circumventing the law. This was demonstrated 25 years ago, when she said it was illegal to support conscientious objection, but it was not illegal to call for an end to conscription. Mindful of the fact that in World War 2 the government respected the political divisions of the time and did not impose universal conscription, we could then call on our government to demonstrate the same sensitivity in SA of the 1980's. In this way the End Conscription Campaign was born.

Sheena was a committed pacifist and abhorred all forms of violence. She campaigned ceaselessly for the abolition of capital punishment, and for a gun free South Africa. In the climate of South Africa at that time, she came up against fierce opposition, but as always this did not deter her at all. She saw with great satisfaction the successful end of one campaign when the death penalty was abolished by the first constitutional court of our democracy.

She strongly believed that knowledge is power, and to this end she and others in the Sash produced a series of little teaching booklets. They were the size of the dompas or Pass Book that every adult black person had to carry at all times, and which fitted easily into a pocket. They were written in simple direct English and were translated into all the vernacular languages. Millions were printed and distributed free of charge, on a variety of subjects. You and the Pass Laws, You and Your Welfare Grant, You and Removals, And finally and triumphantly, this one.....You and the Vote!

Sheena was known throughout the length and breadth of South Africa and had become a beacon of hope to many black struggling to cope in a dark and hostile world. I recall one occasion when she accompanied me to a remote rural community threatened with forced removal in what was the Northern Transvaal. We stopped in the village to ask for directions and someone recognised her in the car. The word spread like wild fire that maDuncan was there. They felt quite sure when they saw her that because she had come there, they would be helped.

For all of us who have basked in her warmth and abundant love, shared a rollicking laugh with her, enjoyed her generous hospitality, and been emboldened by her courage, we can truly say in Biblical terms, that she was "a woman of valour, her price is far above rubies.... She spreads out her palm to the poor and extends her hands to the destitute.....She opens her mouth with wisdom, and a lesson of kindness is on her tongue.....Her children will rise up and call her blessed"

While we grieve at the passing of this great woman, our irreplaceable and unforgettable friend, we are at the same time grateful for her life, her leadership, her inspiration and for the privilege of having known her. Our lives were immeasurably enriched by her presence.

HAMBA KAHLE SHEENA.