

Ethel and Alex Walt (d. 2010)

Ethel Walt, a long-time national leader of the Black Sash, has died in Johannesburg on 3 June 2010, after a car accident about two weeks ago. She was a dedicated and hard-working member of the organisation, and one of the founding trustees of its Advice Office Trust in 1985. She was closely involved in its advice office work, and an energetic and successful fund-raiser. Most notable of all her achievements was her work against forced removals of whole communities under apartheid legislation, and in the founding of the Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC).

The Black Sash is saddened to hear about the recent passing of Ethel's husband, Alex Walt, in July 2011.

A TRIBUTE TO ALEX WALT BY MARY BURTON:

Alex Walt was a man of fine intellect and great integrity, a generous host and a warm friend. Many of us in the Black Sash will remember his wise and gentle conversation and his kind hospitality. We will always honour him specially for his support of Ethel. He was rightly proud of her, and they were a wonderful couple.

A gardening friend once said that her husband was like a stake to her – loosely tied so that she was free to move and grow, but always protecting her from harsh winds or hard knocks. Alex was a stake for Ethel, a companion and a support. In the best tradition of Black Sash husbands – and we think of Neil Duncan and Nathan Harris, among many others – he could always be relied on for help of any kind.

Losing Ethel so tragically must have been the most cruel blow possible. His decision, together with his family, to establish a bursary in her memory, for a student to pursue human rights law, is evidence of how highly they esteemed her, and of Alex's commitment to a just and democratic society in South Africa. We have been fortunate to know someone of his stature, and we will remember them both with love and the highest respect.

Mary Burton

TRIBUTES TO ETHEL WALT

A tribute from Mary Burton



Ethel co-authored (with Gita Dyzenhaus) an article published in the Black Sash magazine in August 1980, advocating a Bill of Rights for South Africa. In the same year she protested, with Jill Wentzel, outside the Medical and Dental Council offices in Pretoria against the decision to drop the disciplinary charges in the death of Steve Biko. They faced a hostile public, and were taken to BOSS headquarters where they were questioned and released after an hour.

She was absolutely committed to the work of the Black Sash's "resettlement committee", never holding back from the support of communities such as those of Rooigrond (who had already been moved from Machavistad in 1971 and were in 1982 (due to be moved again to Bodibe); of Driefontein (defined as a "black spot" which had to be moved, and where Saul Mkhize was shot dead at Eastertime in 1983); Mathopestad, where attempts were made by the authorities to get people to move "voluntarily". This involvement was to lead to the recognition that a special committee – TRAC – was needed to address the issue in the Transvaal, and Ethel played a major part in its establishment.

Just a month ago, when Sheena Duncan died, Ethel swung into action to help her daughters and to draw Black Sash members together to pay tribute. She spoke eloquently at Sheena's funeral, and was part of the organising committee which put together the memorial service in Soweto. We could never have dreamt that such a short time later we would lose Ethel too. Her gentleness, her warmth and humour, and her indefatigable hard work will be long remembered.

A tribute from Karl Beck

I found out quite late about the tragic death of Ethel Walt, another great and brave defender of human rights. Via this note I wish to express my profound sympathy to all Black Sash members for the double loss that they have suffered this year in the passing of these giants. With sincere respect,

A tribute from Judith Hawarden

I remember Ethel for so much: I see her sitting on the floor, back straight, legs crossed, some exquisite piece of work in her hands - embroidery or tapestry or needlework. I have a handtowel on which she embroidered JH and gave me for my 50th birthday. Sixteen years later I still save it for special guests. Now more than ever. And her gifts as a hostess and entertainer. Parties at the Walts were always wonderful events. Not to mention her talents as a psychologist, particularly with children. She was a multi-faceted woman.

A tribute from Pat Tucker

Like Judith, my memories of Ethel in addition to her wonderful work in resettlement, her steadfast courage and conviction and her wise presence on the Trust, relate to Ethel as friend, as superb hostess, provider of marvellous meals, Ethel as devoted wife, as proud mother and grandmother; a creative and caring human being with, it seemed, time for everybody. The world is, indeed, a poorer place today.

A tribute from Marj Brown

Ethel spent many hours meticulously drawing arrows from the areas that were under threat of removal in the 1980s to the areas in the homelands they were to be removed to – an update of a previous Black Sash map displaying the communities that were under threat. This map was used to educate people and lobby against forced removals. As my immediate supervisor in TRAC when I was a fieldworker, I always was struck by Ethel's resolve and dignity – she was so supportive and understanding of the pressures we faced in the field. Recently Ethel and I were interviewed by Harvard lawyers investigating the businesses that benefitted from the Homelands during Apartheid and Ethel's map once again was used to further their understanding. It is permanently on my classroom wall, as a teaching resource and a copy is in the Apartheid Museum. She was generous, empathetic and I am bereft.

A tribute from Mary Jankowitz

I remember her enormous personal kindness. You could always take your sorrows & problems to Ethel, knowing that however grave her many responsibilities at the time, you would be assured of patient listening, profound understanding &, in the end, words of wisdom & encouragement which gave you the strength you needed. How we will miss her!

A tribute from Rosemary van Wyk Smith.

Ethel walked the whole way with Sheena and made a remarkable contribution.

A tribute from Barbara Klugman.

"When I think of Ethel and the Black Sash I think of how she packed her toothbrush to take to Bophuthatswanana when they went to protest, just in case they got

detained. And they did. And Mam Lydia described how Ethel, who had most reason to complain or be anxious, kept everyone's spirits up through the whole experience. Ethel was brave and funny and just stood firm. I learned so much from her. My thoughts are with Alex and the family."

A tribute from Aninka Claassens.

Geoff and I loved Ethel, and I will forever be grateful for the care, love, support, humour (not to mention lovingly prepared food!) that she lavished on us Trac fieldworkers. I have seen her in so many different kinds of situations, always feisty, always brave, ever insightful and practical and always taking care of those around her. She also had an extra-ordinary capacity to bounce back from disasters and tough times, and rally the rest of us when the going got really tough. I feel that she has been a kind of guardian mother-angel protecting and looking out for me – a role model of a woman both actively engaged in changing the world and nurturing and caring for those around her.

A tribute from Jenny de Tolly.

She was such a very important part of the Sash and the struggle for human rights in SA and I do hope she will be recognised as such. The tributes which have been coming in from the Sashers on the email list are testimony to how much she meant to other members and to her very special intellectual and emotional qualities. I think of her like a backbone to the Sash, strong, dependable, supportive, clear in her beliefs and ready to turn them into action. I am so grateful to have spent time with her on the Trust, which was when I learned to appreciate her qualities of a clear understanding of the issues combined with a wise perspective.

A tribute from Mary Kleinenberg.

Perhaps because I worked in the land sector I felt a special bond with Ethel. She also took me to my first Trust meeting and we talked a lot about the Sash and TRAC, and she nurtured and encouraged, in her gentle and caring way, a rather nervous new Trustee. When Ethel was so ill with her infected hip joint we talked on the phone and she showed such incredible courage and determination. She did have a special way of listening and understanding the underlying issues. I feel very privileged to have known Ethel, and to have had the opportunity to talk to her at Sheena's funeral, she will be greatly missed.

A tribute from Laura Pollecutt.

Ethel combined the domestic with the intellectual in a profound way. She did the most amazing needlepoint and was a wonderful cook but she also managed projects, led debates and was not afraid of apartheid authority. Her contribution was consistent and substantial; a real pillar of the Black Sash. She was also among the women detained in Bophathatswana on the brink of the new dispensation.

A tribute from Gille de Vlieg

I find myself feeling bereft... Ethel took it upon herself to nurture me, and I am profoundly grateful for all the times (often long, long journeys to rural areas) we had together. I thank you all for the tributes you have written and I endorse them all. She will always be a place of comfort I will remember with gratitude. I long to be with you all this afternoon and standing proudly with my sash.... I hope to go to Sunday prayers, so that I may be with others who knew and loved this outstanding woman.

A tribute from Dot Cleminshaw

Being an ordinary member in Cape Town, I never had the opportunity to meet Ethel, but I knew her sister, Pauline Cohen, in London and originally from Cape Town. She spoke about Ethel with obvious pride. As an organisation, we were admired for the wonderful calibre of the women who were attracted to join us. Reading the marvellous tributes paid to her, we realise how fortunate we were to have had her among the leadership.

A tribute from Di Oliver

Ethel's work in "resettlement" and her vigorous pursuit of the establishment of TRAC made a great impression on me in the 80s. Our country is so fortunate to have enjoyed Ethel's unwavering dedication to the cause of justice and her courageous involvement in fighting injustice. She makes me feel very proud of being a trustee of the Black Sash Trust, of which she was a founder trustee. Her gentle concern for and loving attention to Sheena during her illness was a great comfort to us who live far away from Gauteng. Her unexpected death is a huge loss to us all.

A tribute from Denise Ackermann

Many years ago I spent time with Ethel when I was writing about Black Sash. She was a fund of information, always communicated in a lively and very humorous way. Despite her overcommitted days and total dedication to her work for Sash, she always had time to share her wisdom and knowledge. She was a true stalwart, a woman of courage and a deep sense of justice.

A tribute from Gudrun Oberprieler

How very sad indeed that Ethel has also gone now so very soon after Sheena; what a loss to the Sash and to all who knew her, especially her very close friends and family. I remember the many meetings we had at her home in Killarney, her hospitality (Sash meetings of course were always accompanied by tea and good eats), and that I often thought there was such a contrast between the lady she was and the elegance of her home, and her activism in the dusty rural areas. I have just dug out the newspaper clippings I kept of our arrest in Mmabatho in 1991 and looked again at the photos showing Ethel with a poster reading 'We stand for political freedom for all'. She naturally acted as the leader of our group during that incident, talking with the police, and I clearly remember her sitting on the floor with her knitting through the long periods of waiting at the police station and in the cells. I also recall that we joked that the Bop police seemed so scared of us yet had failed to confiscate Ethel's 'traditional weapons', her knitting needles. Her spirit and humour never failed and she took it all in her stride. Some papers afterwards ran interviews with Ethel in which she complained especially

about the primitive and appalling conditions of the police cells - which makes me smile again, as of course we hadn't exactly booked ourselves into a 5 star establishment for the weekend. I also remember that Ethel asked some of the clerical staff in the police station or the court what they thought their future would be when Bop and the homeland system would crumble, as she had no doubt it would do soon, and their baffled faces. That was almost 20 years ago, and then already Ethel was 65, never too scared or too precious to show up and take a stand against injustice. Hamba kahle, Ethel, may you rest in peace.

A tribute from Sally Rorvik

I was not privileged to know Ethel, but I wish her family and loved ones comfort and strength. What an admirable woman she was!

[Read a tribute from the SA Jewish Report](#)

Sash woman's 'nightmare'

FROM PAGE 1

The group, along with five observers, were apparently arrested for creating a public disturbance, attending an illegal gathering, and furthering the aims of the organisation, which is banned in Bophuthatswana.

"Eight members of the group were detained at the Mmabatho police station cells on Saturday. The others were detained at the Mafikeng police station cells. The group was released yesterday after each paying a R400 fine for holding an illegal gathering. All charges against the five observers were dropped.

Mrs Walt said that the members knew that the gathering was illegal "because we are banned in Bop but that is one of the very reasons we went to protest".

Mrs Walt said that the group had staged a peaceful protest outside a shopping centre in Mmabatho. The members stood in a semi-circle

holding pickets but "did not obstruct traffic or pedestrians".

"Police arrived at the scene after a short while and gave us five minutes to disperse, which we did. But they then insisted on confiscating our placards.

"They gave us full assurance that if we returned with them to the police station they would give us a receipt for the placards and that we would be free to go. Unfortunately that did not happen."

Mrs Walt said that after receiving the receipts a big group of heavily armed policemen surrounded the members' cars and searched the cars several times.

Film was pulled out of Press photographers' cameras.

"We were then taken back into the police station where we were detained.

"The cell in Mmabatho, which eight of us shared with six other

prisoners, was very small. It was dark, gloomy, cold and horrible.

"There was an open toilet on either side of the cell, but only one worked. One basin had a small trickle of water and there was a shower that didn't work.

"We were given seven mats and three blankets. One of the mats had to be used to close an opening to prevent rats from coming into the cell."

"There was no provision for washing. Fortunately, people on the outside supplied us with some food, tooth-brushes, facecloths and track suits."

Two other members who were detained, Miss Gudrun Oberprieler and Miss Pam Lloyd, said they were thrilled to be back home.

"We were furious when it first happened. It was so stupid of us to believe their assurances of letting us go after we received our receipts for



Mrs ETHEL WALT relaxes in her Killarney home last night after her ordeal in a Bophuthatswana prison cell.

our pickets," Miss Lloyd said last night.

"Our detention and what we have seen was first hand experience of the oppression that exists in that country.

Miss Oberprieler, who was held at the Mafikeng cells, said that

they were given minimal food and the food they were given was usually barot and inedible.

Both felt it was "judicious" how threatened Bophuthatswana had felt about a "peaceful gathering of 11 women".

Sash woman tells of Bop 'nightmare'

By Vivian Warby

"It was a nightmare and we were scared — the conditions under which we were detained were appalling," Mrs Ethel Walt, one of the 11 members of the Black Sash who were detained in Mmabatho on Saturday, said at her Killarney home last night.

Mrs Walt and 10 others from the Black Sash had gone to Bophuthatswana on Saturday to stage a peaceful picket to highlight the "excessive abuses of human rights" in the country.

Exhausted members who returned to Johan-

nesburg last night spoke of the "horrific" and "appalling" conditions in which they were held in rat-infested cement cells and of the inedible food which those who were detained in Mafikeng were given.

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Citizen 9/10 New

New Nation Oct 11-17

Sash protestors fined for Bop placard demo

Bophuthatswana authorities indicated that they intend to act firmly against anti-apartheid activists when 11 Black Sash members were fined R400 or eight-months imprisonment for holding an illegal placard-demonstration.

At the same time, charges against five international observers were withdrawn.

The five were arrested for watching a demonstration staged by the members of the Black Sash in Mmabatho in protest against the continued detention of political prisoners and the ban of the Black Sash in the homeland.

The women complained about the aggressive behaviour of the Bop police who arrested them and said that they had not received any food on their first day of detention.

In response to the arrests, the German Embassy accused the South African government of connivance because of its recognition of Bophuthatswana, which was not recognised internationally.