

# Noel Robb (d. 2009)

The Black Sash has lost one of its founding members and most dedicated workers, the director of its first Advice Office, established in Cape Town in 1958, and a member of its governing regional council for almost 40 years. In March 1989, we elected her as honorary life Vice President, in tribute to her long history of leadership and service to the organization.



The Black Sash would like to thank all those who have sent donations to the organisation as part of their tributes to Noel, including the Robb family; Cherry and Roger Fisher; Moira and Libby; the Haggie family; Sandy Tolosana; Mosa; Oliver; the Tilney's; the Dicey's; the Ratcliffe's; Robby and Libby Ardington; Di Carter; The Study Club for Noel Robb; Rosemary De Waal; the Power's and Jesse.

- [Read the tribute to Noel on the UCT website](#)
- [Read the tribute to Noel by Sarah-Anne Raynham](#)

## **A tribute to Noel Robb, Black Sash honorary life Vice-President, by Mary Burton (Black Sash Trustee)**

"The Black Sash has lost one of its founding members and most dedicated workers, the director of its first Advice Office, established in Cape Town in 1958, and a member of its governing regional council for almost 40 years. In March 1989, we elected her as honorary life Vice President, in tribute to her long history of leadership and service to the organization. The May 1989 issue of our magazine Sash, has an account of her many activities, and a wonderful photograph taken by Gille de Vlieg. There are of course many photographs of her taken over the years – this week Sheena Duncan remembered in particular one of her striding over the dunes in Crossroads, in its early days of being threatened with demolition. There are many articles too, and many reports written by Noel, filling the pages of our publications.

Her life spanned decades of great significance in South Africa, and she witnessed enormous change, and contributed in no small measure to some of those changes. The record of her work is preserved in the documents of the Advice Office, and in her own book about the Sash. The archives of the University of Cape Town are grateful to have her own collection of papers, and all these will be important material for future historians. Her knowledge of the ramifications of the "pass laws", and the injustice and misery they caused, was a powerful tool in the struggle for justice and a better life for all. Her own memoir, *The Sash and I*, is a powerful story of someone who was not prepared to let wrongs go by without trying to do something about righting them.

She was singled out recently in the book by Dennis Davis and Michelle Le Roux, *Precedent and Possibility: The Abuse of Law in South Africa*, where they describe the battle of Mr Komani to be allowed to have his wife live with him in Gugulethu. He approached the Advice Office, where "Noel Robb, one of the stalwarts of the office, sought to ensure the proper prosecution of Komani's appeal... she wrote to Geoffrey Budlender ... at the Legal Resources Centre. It proved to be a stroke of genius" (quoted in the *Sunday Independent*, 23 November 2008). The Komani family eventually obtained the requisite permission, paving the way for many other families to live together within the law.

Day after day in the office, she would listen to people's problems, seek for possible solutions and explain the options. Determined to help, she would telephone officials and persuade or berate them. She maintained her own reputation for hard work and for high standards – know your facts, don't exaggerate (things are quite bad enough without that), state your case firmly but politely. She read her way steadily through Hansard each week, pointing out issues that needed to be taken up. She prepared information for sympathetic Members of Parliament, most notably Helen Suzman, to enable them to ask penetrating questions of Cabinet Ministers.

Her work in Crossroads and the other informal settlements which arose in Cape Town in defiance of the pass laws was of particular importance. It was Noel who pointed out to us the change which was taking place during the 1970s in the minds of people who were no longer prepared to tolerate the restrictions on their freedom of movement. They had come, they were not hiding, they were determined to stay.

Responding to change was a particular talent of Noel's. Many members have commented on her ability to take part in tough arguments, spell out her views, listen carefully to others, and if persuaded, change her mind. This openness kept her attuned to new ideas, and enabled younger members to know that their views were taken seriously.

She was one of those who did not wish to be described as a feminist, yet she epitomised the determination, independence, and courage of the feminist movement. She is quoted in the Sash article as saying "I am keen on Sash remaining women only, because I feel women are much more able to change their thinking as they get older through their close association with the thinking of their children" (she could have added grandchildren and great-grandchildren).

After the Black Sash changed its structures in 1995, she remained involved in the Legiwatch group, monitoring the new Parliament as we had done the old. She retained her clarity of thought and determination to stand on principle. Right back in 1989 she said "Whatever new government gets in, they will be doing things for pragmatic reasons and we will be standing outside opposing them".

I have been particularly asked to speak of her impact on the current generation of people in the Black Sash, who are proud to hold her up as an example. National and regional offices have sent their condolences and tributes, and a place has been created on the Sash website for them. Those who cannot be here send their respect and regrets.

She had many interests in addition to the Black Sash, of course: the Marion Institute, St Cyprian's School, this St Saviour's church itself, the ASSET Trust, the University of Cape Town, and the famous study club to which she belonged and for which she prepared many papers over the years (and sharing her learning with many of us).

We could not leave out of any tribute the pleasure we had in Noel's company. Always interesting and well informed, amusing and stimulating. Travelling in the 1960s to national conferences by train in her company was an education in itself. Advice on handling teething babies, recalcitrant teenagers, even recalcitrant husbands, was handed out equally with useful information about the coming conference debates.

This can be no more than a glimpse of all that Noel was to the Black Sash and to the thousands of people who sought its assistance. Her life was one of service and achievement, and we are proud to have been associated with it. We will never forget her."

**A tribute from Legiwatch** - "A great champion of Justice for All. She will be sadly missed by her colleagues in Legiwatch" - Cape Times, 28 January 2008

**A tribute from Diana Andrews** - who was one of the first Advice Office Workers with Noel, Lettie Malindi and the late Barbara Versfeld in Athlone. Di is now 84 years old and leads a very active life...

"Noel, I salute you, an indomitable character, from whom I learned and gained so much. I so admired your fortitude, your fighting spirit that never gave up. You studied and knew

the law and forever searched for loopholes in it. You were untiring in your efforts to alleviate the lot of those legislated against, You were strong, a force to be reckoned with - a little scary at times! But also, you were gentle, considerate and with an inner humility, I valued who you were and all you gave of yourself so unstintedly. A big thank you, and to your family, who meant so much to you, my loving thoughts and condolences."

### **A tribute from Dot Cleminshaw**

"I first met Noel Robb when she came with Moira Henderson to meetings of the South African Defence and Aid Fund (D & A) in Cape Town at the end of the 1960 state of emergency. D & A found lawyers to defend people charged with political offences. It had a national office in Johannesburg and other branches in Durban and Port Elizabeth. The Cape Town executive committee was comprised of two representatives from each of various civil society organisations, namely: the Black Sash (Noel and Moira); Liberal Party of SA (attorney, Barney Zackon, who was the first chairman, and myself – not yet a member of Sash); National Council of Women (Barbara Grieve and Mary Stoy - they were also Black Sash members); the Congress of Democrats (Albie Sachs, then legal adviser to members of SACTU, and another representative whose name escapes me) and I think the Quaker Service Fund (Anna Pearce and another). The SA Institute of Race Relations later sent an observer. We held weekly meetings in Parliament Chambers, next to Marks Building. We differed in social and political backgrounds and at first were rather suspicious of each other, but soon functioned well and enabled the defence of a large number of cases. The facts of some were dramatic, even appalling, and we were well aware that the government did not like what we were doing, but we were operating within the law and we tried to be scrupulously correct in our reports. Noel was rightly indignant when publicity put out by Canon Collins of the International Defence and Aid Fund in London exaggerated our achievements. We felt this not only endangered our work, but importantly on occasion got the facts wrong. In the end D & A was banned and so were its successive chairmen, not, let it be said, because of any action by Canon Collins, but stately because the SA government were convinced we were promoting the aims of communism. I recall the steadiness, common sense and awareness of responsibility that exuded from Noel and Moira. They themselves were very different personalities. I thought Noel rather imperious and forthright. Later, when I learned that she was an admiral's daughter, had a science degree, had been a school teacher and was the mother of five children, I thought it no wonder she was bossy! Moira was equally self-confident, but quietly and firmly spoken and they were obviously close friends.\*\* Remembering Noel over many years, I see her against the background of the SA Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR, founded in 1929 to work for "peace, goodwill and practical co-operation between the various sections and races of the population of South Africa"). It was the progenitor of other organisations that hived off to deal with sometimes unforeseen aspects of its work. Many of us activists against apartheid were members of SAIRR and saw each other frequently at meetings of other likeminded organisations, such as CAFDA (1944), the Civil Rights League (1948), the Liberal Party of SA (1953), the Women's Defence of the Constitution League (1955) which later became known as the Black Sash, the Institute of Citizenship, and the National Council of Women. A moving spirit in most of these organisations was the eminent lawyer and parliamentarian, Mr. Donald Molteno, QC. The epitome of the Cape liberal tradition, he fought for civil liberties and against racial injustice. His values and example inspired us to give much time and voluntary effort to do likewise. For years Molteno single-handedly

dealt with a large case load of problems related to passes, migrant labour, housing and family life. He influenced the decision of the SAIRR and Black Sash to found the Athlone Advice Office which became a major part of Noel's life. I did not join the Black Sash until it opened membership to all races. I remember how impressed I was at one of the first general meetings of the Cape Western Region I attended, when Noel and Moira reported on a difficult interview with the Minister of Bantu Affairs. They had gone to present a Black Sash memorandum on the latest odious Bill and were rather nervous of him and his advisers. "However", Noel said, "we soon realised that, having studied the Bill, we knew far more about its contents than they did, and from there on we were completely at ease" I was a member of the Black Sash Western Cape Regional committee over many years and remember Noel's many contributions and Advice Office reports. I recall standing with her and others in placard demonstrations outside Parliament. "Legal now, Immoral forever!" ran one early poster. Noel was always well dressed, her wavy hair beautifully set, and with her forthright manner very impressive. I noticed though that she was able to accept intelligent contradiction from much younger members elected to the committee as the years went by. She wrote me a note in 2004 recalling some of the things we had shared, like working for D & A and in 1964 taking food to young people detained prior to the African Resistance Movement trial. When one of them, Stephanie Kemp, was released after serving a prison sentence, she asked me in a rather embarrassed way: "Was Mrs. Robb shocked?" She meant shocked at finding that a seemingly law-abiding young acquaintance had been part of an underground sabotage group. I told Stephanie that Noel had observed her being taken away in a police van, shouting and banging from the inside, and had admired the spirited way she behaved. During the 70s and 80s we also shared the same telephone pest, the one who rang late at night with heavy breathing and threats of rape. Noel and her husband, Mr. Frank Robb, were very generous with their time, money and beautiful home, first at Silverhurst and later at 2, Highwick Drive. Many Black Sash and other meetings were held there. Sometimes we would catch sight of handsome, silverhaired Frank making himself scarce while his wife prepared for our arrival. I knew that Donald Molteno, one-time Dean of the Law faculty at the University of Cape Town and for many years a member of its Council, had regretfully resigned in 1960 so as to create a vacancy, so making possible the retention of Frank Robb, whose financial ability he greatly admired. Mr. Robb was chairman of the Finance and General Purposes committee. Both he and Noel had strong associations with the university and with the Baxter theatre complex, which incidentally was funded by Moira Henderson's father, Mr. Duncan Baxter, a condition being that it was open to all races, despite the Group Areas Act that enforced segregation. I recall other evening gatherings at "Silverhurst" to which Noel invited a small audience to hear interesting speakers in a totally private atmosphere, like Prof. Nic Olivier from SABRA (incidentally, the discussion changed his political views), a Rev McCrystal, speaking discreetly about his experiences as a prison chaplain to Robben Island, and the educationist, Sir Robert Birley, whose acquaintance with the long sweep of history reassured us that tyranny would not survive endlessly. Scores of us attended Noel's splendid 90th birthday party in her beautiful garden. I was lucky to be seated at her table overlooking the garden, directed there mainly because in our old age, we were both afflicted with severe back pain. Also at our table was her stalwart friend and co-founder of the Black Sash, Eulalie Stott. Only a few weeks before she died I saw Noel at the Baxter Concert Hall, greatly enjoying the music from her wheelchair, and cared for by her daughter, Rosemary de Waal. Noel left 13 grandchildren and 13 greatgrandchildren."

### **A tribute from Sally Cristini**

"I am eternally grateful to Mrs. Robb for her driving force and pioneering work which ensured that 'Koornhof's Influx Control Laws' and eventually the Group Areas Act were eventually derailed. Her determination, kinowledge, and excellent organisational skills were an inspiration as we worked in the advice offices in Mowbray and Khayelitsha. Her efforts certainly bore fruit. A well-deserved restful peace to Mama Robb".

**A tribute from Dr Laurine Platzky** - Deputy Director-General Governance and Integration and 2010 FIFA World Cup Coordinator, Department of the Premier Provincial Government of the Western Cape.

"Noel Robb was immensely clear and strong in her convictions, never apologetic or shy to speak the truth. I remember in the early 1970s when there was a meeting at UWC to discuss yet another ghastly apartheid-related happening. Noel was representing the Black Sash, I was there as a student leader from UCT. An earnest UWC student was putting forward some idea for action which Noel thought either irresponsible or unworkable. She disagreed with him, His response was 'you are disagreeing with me because I'm black'. 'Oh no' she said clearly and calmly 'I'm disagreeing with you because you are wrong'. None of us would have dared to say anything in those sensitive days of the emerging black consciousness movement..."

### **A tribute from Vertrees Malherbe**

"Noel would have been matter-of-fact about this event: "95 years old – had a good life – lots of children, grandchildren and greats (it's being close to our children which keeps women like myself open to the world and up-to-date) – never meant to join the Black Sash but I did, just like that, when I heard what it was doing and kept on learning from it (our biggest mistake was closing down the membership – in case you never heard me say it) – there was time for St Monica's and bridge, for travel and my study group, and all those people with cameras and tapes who came for my thoughts and life story." Noel's influence for good on many lives has been incalculable. Go well, dear Noel.

### **A tribute from Mary Newman**

"For Noel - You always were one of the loveliest, best and bravest women of your generation! You will be remembered as a true champion - always vigilant against injustice, always caring and always willing to induct and encourage those around you and those younger than yourself to take a stand! Farewell with love."

### **A tribute from Lorna Levy**

"It was a strange experience for me to become involved with the Black Sash Legiwatch Group in about 1998. Strange because I was a returned exile, with a very radical perspective and slightly suspicious of the group of other middle-aged Black Sash whom I joined every Friday morning in Plein Street or in Pauline Podbrey's Constantia garden. I carried then a memory of the Black Sash from my youth in Johannesburg where groups of white ladies stood in groups, very dignified, perhaps wearing hats and gloves but with their sashes. They always seemed a group of worthy ladies, fitting successors to the Pankhurst Suffragettes.

In 1998, Noel immediately made an impression on me. She was the oldest of the group and had a fund of knowledge from her work in the Advice Office. She was committed and dogmatic in her opinions. She really did want the volunteers to continue playing a more pro-active role in the organisation, a position with which I sympathised.

At that time we would go to Parliament to monitor the work of selected Portfolio Committees and then submit reports to the IDASA programme on Parliament. I remember Noel at some of those parliamentary meetings. I would always know she was there when a folded walking stick would be tossed upwards to unfold and that would be the moment she was leaving.

She was a woman of great conviction, generous and dedicated - one the best to come out of the struggle against apartheid.

I salute her memory."

### **A tribute from Bastienne Klein - Volunteer 1989 - 1993 and Advice Office Director 1993-1997**

"I encountered Noël on becoming a volunteer at the Sash Advice Office, in 1989. She lost no time in telling me that she'd been running the advice office long before I was born! She would balance out this powerfullness by explaining how to deal with advice seekers, and was one of the most endlessly patient women when it came to dealing with a case - especially when she knew she was right. She had a shrewd sense of what was fair, what was a right, and never gave up when dealing with officials - a task seldom rewarded by the medal it deserves.

I particularly valued her insights on coming to this advice office work, around about her 40's. She would often chide me about the gauche youthful insistence that the law could be used to deal with the government itself, when trying to win a case. She was all for finding a way with officialdom first, before shooting from the hip. Her sense of humour was infectious, particularly when reporting the Hansard at Sash's Regional Council meetings: one such was the parliamentary report on how many people had changed their racial classification. '14 coloureds were reclassified Indian' she would boom authoritatively with a straight face, while we collapsed with laughter at the ridiculousness of it all.

Her legendary standing outside parliament and other places, in protest, was one of the ways I learnt that women place their bodies physically on the line, to make a statement. I went with her into a township advice office, learning how important it was to take oneself to where people actually lived and experienced the problems they were reporting to us.

She taught devotion to the task by being there every week, and giving advice in the best way possible. When one wrote letters of commiseration and sympathy to her - she always replied. She was a great example of a woman with the capacity to respond to the world around her, and to the individuals who approached her.

I'll miss seeing you arrive in your long black boots, Noël!

I am grateful and thankful that I was able to work alongside her."

### **A tribute from Di Oliver, Black Sash Trustee**

"One of the values of the Black Sash is "Rigour". Noel embodied all the values of the organisation, but always impressed me most with her rigour. It was what she expected of those of us who worked in the Advice Office. Without lecturing us on the need for accuracy and backing up what we said with facts, she set the pace, the standards and the tone. Day after day she started work at 9h00 in the Advice Office and kept her head down until it was time to go home for lunch. The more complex the problem that people coming to the office presented to Noel, the more she worked like a dog with a bone. She often had huge delegations of people coming to see her and as they gathered around her little desk in the corner, she and Mrs Malindi or David Viti would unpick the problem meticulously and discuss whether there was any possibility of redress. I wonder what has happened to all those files in the old "Bantu Affairs Administration". There would be many amongst them with Noel's meticulous, handwritten account of how the dreaded Pass Laws affected every facet of people's lives. Apart from her political work in the Sash, especially her meticulous scrutiny of Hansard and Government Gazettes, I so admired the way Noel spent all those voluntary hours in the Advice Office. She clearly had a very busy home to run and family to attend to. She was in demand at the Marion Institute and Race Relations, at the same time as being an active support to her close and lifelong friends who were also involved in opposition to apartheid, like Moira Henderson in Dependants Conference, Eulalie Stott in the City Council and many others who relied on her incisive analysis of the political trends and formulating responses to them. She believed in being a personal witness to situations and often went where no 'white' people had ever ventured unless they worked for the State. She was a mine of information about the deteriorating conditions in which the majority of people lived and hosted many foreign visitors seeking information, often accompanying them on visits to flash points. She was courageous, fearless and strong. She was also a wonderful friend and made those of us who were in awe of her feel we were a welcome part of her life. She encouraged us to have opinions and she never failed to back down or change her mind if she felt she had been wrong. I shall miss her enormously - and miss sending her Christmas-cum-birthday cards that she never failed to acknowledge, right to the end of her remarkable life."

### **A tribute from Glen Moll**

"Dear Robud.  
Ros phoned on Friday night and told me of your mother's death. My love and sympathy, Robud. It will have been an enormous shock for you but a condolence that she went in her sleep. Such a blessing for her. What a hole she'll leave in your life.... It's probably for you all, as it was when my mom died, the end of an era - there's extra sadness in that. And for so many, many people it will also be hugely significant. Helen Suzman so recently, and now Noel.



Newcomers to the Black Sash were often in awe of her. She would speak so authoritatively and with such strong conviction. But awe soon turned to admiration for the depth of her knowledge, for her enormous courage and her practicality. I first got to know her in the early 70s in the Advice Office. I soon saw how her commanding ways were reinforced by a fierce integrity. How well she used her manner when dealing with Bantu Administration! What backbone she gave us! She helped us to speak fearlessly. She was always so clear sighted and gave of herself tirelessly (as I know you do).

What a privilege it was to share those years! It was a university of sorts, yet even though we might know each others' ideas and opinions through debate; very often, we knew virtually nothing about each other's personal lives. Despite that in our work together there was a true spirit of liberte', egalite', fraternite'. I miss that.

I am sad that Noel is no longer fighting the good fight, as she did, I believe, until the end. I so dearly wish I could be there to pay my last respects.

My love to you, Robud. I have mislaid my South African phone book, but right now I'm sure your phone is ringing hot. You will have so much to organise."You're in my thoughts.

With much love,  
Glen