

Sheena Duncan (d. 2010)

Black Sash patron and veteran human rights activist Sheena Duncan died peacefully in her sleep at her home in Johannesburg on Tuesday, the 4th of May 2010. She was 77 and leaves behind two daughters and two grandchildren.

Sheena was well-loved and admired for her enduring commitment to work for justice; her unshaken faith in peaceful ways of doing so; and her warm and courageous heart for supporting those who suffer. We are all united in our grief and our memories of her incredible spirit and great humour. She will not be forgotten.



Sheena's daughters Lindsay and Carey wish to thank everyone who has left tributes on our website: *"We have been very touched by all the tributes that we have received and thank all those who sent condolences to the family. Like so many, we will miss her no end, but know that she has run a great race and deserves eternal rest."*

"To speak with a firm and clear voice on major national questions, unprotected by the shield of immunity enjoyed by members of the country's organs of government, and unruffled by the countless repercussions of being ostracised by a privileged minority, is a measure of your deep concern for human rights and commitment to the principle of justice for all."

- Nelson Mandela in a letter to Sheena Duncan on the Black Sash's 30th birthday in 1985 [[view full letter](#)]

- Read the **tribute given by Mary Burton** and by **Black Sash Advocacy Programme Manager Elroy Paulus** at Sheena's memorial service at the Black Sash National Office in Cape Town on Wednesday, 19th May 2010
- [Read the tribute made by Black Sash Chairwoman Bongzi Mkhabela at the memorial service held in the Regina Mundi Church in Soweto](#)
- [Read the Eulogy delivered by Ethel Walt at Sheena's funeral on Monday, 10th May at St George's Church in Parktown, Johannesburg](#)
- [Read the tribute from the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba](#) and the **article about Sheena in the Southern Anglican**
- Read the **tribute from the Nelson Mandela Foundation**
- [Read the tribute to Sheena in the New York Times](#) and in [Skyways magazine \(part 2 & part 3\)](#)
- Read the tributes to Sheena in the **UK Guardian**

A tribute from Black Sash Trustee Mary Burton: Sheena Duncan was the National President of the Black Sash from 1975 to 1978, and from 1981 to 1986. She was the founding chair of its Board of Trustees, and in recent years its Patron. She was a leading member of the South African Council of Churches, becoming its honorary life President, and a faithful member of the Anglican Church. She was chair and patron of Gun-Free South Africa.

[Read more ...](#)

A tribute from Black Sash Trustee Rosemary Smith

I called Sheena "my security blanket" she was always "there" for one. During the terrible times in the Eastern Cape in the 80s she would phone PE, East London, and G'town each week to see if we were still around and hear who had been detained. Such was her caring nature and deep concern for people. She had a remarkable ability to take a problem, look at all angles of it and then come up with a fresh slant which would defreeze our paralysed minds. What a remarkable contribution she made in helping make a new society.

A tribute from Black Sash Trustee Jenny De Tolly

Thank you everyone for your contributions to this tribute to Sheena on the announcement of her death. Your words capture how we feel about this wonderful woman whose clear understanding of issues and core values kept our commitment and

strength up in the dark days of apartheid. I feel great sadness tonight, but also a sense of deep gratitude for her leadership, for her life and for the privilege of having known her.

A tribute from Black Sash Advocacy Programme Manager Ratula Beukman

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.

A tribute from the Nelson Mandela Foundation

On behalf of our Founder, Chairman, Board of Trustees and staff we would like to convey our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Sheena Duncan, who died yesterday, May 4. Duncan's passing is a significant loss to a democratic South Africa. She was a leading member, having served two terms as national president, of anti-apartheid organisation, Black Sash. [Read more ...](#)

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

Through thick and thin Sheena was there for the people of South Africa. Sheena - Thanks for your huge contribution to justice and development - and for your sense of fun and humour all the way through from the dark days into democracy and beyond. Hamba kahle. With love, Laurine.

A tribute from Sue Townsend/Joynt

Sheena was certainly was a larger than life person. One of the most important thing I learned from her was (and I can hear her saying it) - always remember the power of the minute taker - and she taught me to take minutes, a skill I have enjoyed ever since. I also remember little things, like when she came to stay with me for a Sash conference in Cape Town, she brought her own bottle of whiskey. This didn't mean that we didn't drink copious amounts of red wine too! When I was still Sue Joynt, I ran the Cape Town advice office (when it was in Mowbray) for many years in the 1980s and it was wonderful having people like Sheena at the end of a phone (oh if only we had e-mail then) - between them, Sheena and Noel were seriously formidable. Mary B and others have talked about the big things that made Sheena special but I am sure it is also the small things, listening to her and Neil call each other darling, hearing her laugh, her acerbic wit,

especially when she had gone to the doorway of a meeting room to have a quick ciggie while keeping her beady eye on proceedings...

A tribute from the Durban Sash members: Sheena Duncan epitomised the values of the Black Sash - a truly caring human being and a courageous South African.

A tribute from Advocate Anil Naidoo

I am deeply saddened to hear the news that Sheena Duncan has passed away. On behalf of the Indiba-Africa Group, please convey my sympathies to her family, Marcella and everyone else at Black Sash. Her death is a huge loss for us all, and particularly to South Africans striving to deepen and strengthen our democracy. A luta continua!

A tribute from Plaatjie Mashego, Cohesive Society Initiative

On behalf of the Building a Cohesive Society Initiative and our Executive Director, Ms. Lynda Odendaal, we would like to send our condolences to the family of Ms. Sheena Duncan who recently passed away. Her undivided involvement in the NGO sector will be always remembered. May her soul rest in peace.

A tribute from Aydin Inal, Turquoise Harmony Institute

I am writing from Turquoise Harmony Institute's Johannesburg offices. I would like to offer our organization's heartfelt condolences for the loss of a great individual who played pivotal role in the struggle for freedom and in the movement. We hope the legacy of such great personalities will be cherished by the future generations to come and guide us all in our endeavors. Warmest regards and deepest condolences.

A tribute from Julie Steffers, Foundation of Human Rights

On behalf of the Foundation of Human Rights I would like to express our sincere condolences.

A tribute from Cynthia Bewana, Jersey Farm Advice and Information Centre

It is sad to hear about the death of such a calibre, we lost an asset as human rights organisation, we will remember her effort in fighting violation and abuse of human rights from every sphere – socially, religious, governmental, and otherwise. We are sorry to her family, pass our condolences to her family. We must thank God for the wonderful life of Sheena that God gave us. She has served the purpose of being born by fighting for the rights of the poor, illiterate, disadvantaged black persons. May her soul rest in peace, we will always remember her.

A tribute from Professor David McQuoid-Mason, Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Howard College School of Law, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Sheena was a great inspiration to us all during the Struggle years and afterwards. She was always consistent in her advocacy on behalf of the oppressed, poor and marginalised people of South Africa. The work conducted by Black Sash is an enduring monument to Sheena's untiring efforts to achieve a fair, just and egalitarian society for all South Africans. Please convey my sincere condolences to her family.

A tribute from Ashnie Padarath

The first time I met Sheena was at the Sash conference in Johannesburg. I recall her asking the meeting to give the 'ancestors' an opportunity to speak and in doing so allowed the likes of Eulalie Stott, Noel Robb and others the space to express their feelings at the closure of the Sash membership. Spending time with Sheena was like being in a university - she was always full of new and interesting ideas and one was sure to be exposed to the most avant-garde thinking and rather off-colour social habits for which she was deeply unrepentant.

During the years I was at Sash, most of us joked that we wanted to be Sheena when we grew up and at one stage there was even some talk about naming our daughters Sheena. There was a fair amount of admiration and interest in Sheena and Neil's relationship too and I recall some of us spending an evening with Neil extracting tales of their courtship. According to Neil, he was brought in to save Sheena from an unsuitable suitor that she had met in Edinburgh. Sheena never confirmed or denied this story and would respond with a hearty chuckle whenever we brought up the issue.

Sheena's passing is a terrible loss to our country. For me she will always serve as a reminder of how passion, courage, honesty and an unyielding belief in justice can bring about change even in the darkest times.

A tribute from Birga Thomas

With great sadness (and fond memories) I remember Sheena. Strength and love to her family.

A tribute from **Anne Christopher**

Please extend my condolences to all at the Sash and Sheena's family and friends.

A tribute from Ela Ghandi

I knew Sheena very well and admired her courage and resilience. My deepest sympathies with her family and friends. She will be sorely missed by all of us.

A tribute from Reverend Danny Chetty

A wonderful friend who leaves behind a powerful legacy of "caring" and I count it a real privilege of having worked with SHEENA. Her work remains within the pillars of our covering of Humanity. May her work rest within our conscience as we strive to restore our humanity.

A tribute from Denise Ackermann

Sheena's death marks the passing of an era in the history of the Black Sash. I want to pay tribute to her unwavering courage, her determined spirit, her acute discernment of the context, and her resolute sense of justice. When I think of Sheena I remember her laugh, her no-nonsense common sense and her profound humanity . It was a great privilege to know her.

A tribute from Thisbe Clegg

During the years I was a member of the Black Sash and later employed by them, I was fortunate to spend many hours with Sheena both socially as a guest in her home and at meetings and in the work environment. She was a warm and caring human being who had made it her business to study the laws of our country thereby enhancing her ability to grasp and analyse situations.

She had enormous energy and was an inspiration to all who worked alongside of her. I feel privileged to have known her. She will be sadly missed and I send love and condolences to her family.

A tribute from Felicity Harrison, Goedgedacht Forum for Social Reflection

It was with great sadness that I heard of the death of Sheena. She was a great inspiration to many of us and a tireless and fearless defender of human rights. Please accept my sincerest condolences on her death – I know that her legacy will remain in the good work that you and your colleagues do at the Black Sash.

A tribute from Stewart Ting Chong, Boston MA

I have so many fond memories of Sheena whom I first met in 1988 when working for Abp Desmond. Her strong opinions, wonderful sense of humor at church Synods and forum discussions advocating human rights and social justice and the acceptance of human sexuality and women priests were my first introduction to a woman who became one of the icons in my life. I drew much strength and motivation from her dedication and perspective of South Africa. I will miss Sheena greatly. Hamba Kahle Mama Sheena.

A tribute from the 'Building a Cohesive Society Initiative'

On behalf of the Building a Cohesive Society Initiative and our Executive Director, Ms. Lynda Odendaal, we would like to send our condolences to the family of Ms. Sheena Duncan who recently passed away. Her undivided involvement in the NGO sector will be always remembered. May her soul rest in peace.

A tribute from Uli Albrecht

Thank you for sending me the sad news about Sheena Duncan, a great, courageous woman, who touched so many stranded, desperate and vulnerable, searching for a better educated life, peace and justice. Knowledge is power. I will always remember her as my mentor and adviser who gave me guidance and support during the many years she stood on my side at the Black Sash Training.

Viva Sheena, Viva!! I salute you.

A tribute from Xolela May, Black Sash

To us a 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 calibre, We will always honour her Spirit by continuing with what Sheena has stood for, for many years in her life. It is our humbly submission to the world that Sheena's legacy which she left to us we will continue with it with diligence in the drive to assist the vulnerable masses of this country who cannot access their Rights as guarantee in Bill of Rights for us to have her we say " it has been a blessing" and may her soul rest in peace.

A tribute from Black Sash Trustee, Nyami Mbhele

It is sad lost Sheena was a Human rights fighter a peace maker and she knew and adress poor people's problems we salute her may her soul rest in peace.

A tribute from Dot Cleminshaw

The country has indeed lost one of our most valuable human beings. She was uniquely splendid and I am proud to have known her. With all good wishes.

A tribute from Sandy Hoffman

As a Sash member dating from the early 80s when Sheena used to come down to Port Elizabeth and breathe fire into any spirits that DARED flag and get us all laughing with her incredible wit I, for one, just think the country has lost one of its most valuable human beings. I know she was in pain and her death was probably a welcome release for her - but this does not negate the validity of a deep acknowledgement of loss.

A tribute from Paul Graham, Executive Director of Idasa

I have just heard the sad news of Sheena's death. Please do pass our condolences to your staff and Board. She played a larger than life role in so many organisations and movements in this country and we in Idasa benefited from her societal leadership.

A tribute from Marion Stevens

A life well lived - I learnt a lot from her - whiskey or gin and tonic...to admiring the roses in St Georges in Parktown.....she was a formidable woman leader who was an incredible role model of how powerful women could be but also gentle and wise, with integrity and awesome energy....may her soul rest in peace.

A tribute from Alison Tilley, Open Democracy Advice Centre

I have been trying to put my finger on what Sheena taught me. The story that springs to mind is from when we were in the middle of the child support grant campaign in about 1998, and the Black Sash had taken a strong position in favour of the grant being increased, and the means test being widened.

[Read more ...](#)

A tribute from Aninka Claassens

The feeling that I associate most with Sheena is that of reassurance in the midst of the insanity and suffering that was apartheid. I remember as a teenager sitting in the Black Sash offices and being horror-struck by the impact of the pass laws on ordinary people's lives, at the same time as awe-struck by Sheena's empathy, respect and perseverance in sitting with person after person, day after day, listening to their stories, discussing options with them, taking statements, writing letters, phoning lawyers, and in some cases having to explain that nothing could be done.

[Read more ...](#)

A tribute from Barbara Cousens

My condolences and sympathy goes out to all who had the privilege of knowing and working with Sheena and especially her close family, Carey, Lindsay, Dick & Ken and their children. To me she was, initially, the "older sister of my boyfriend" but soon I grew to understand that her character and ideals were much larger than life. Inspired by the role model of her mother and the conscience of a father whose stories of the economically and socially deprived people of Scotland touched a nerve in her, she stepped onto the South African arena at a time when it was truly unpopular to voice sentiments against the political machinery of the times. Sheena's life was rooted in Christian ideals and she never wavered in her brave acts. Sheena is a shining light we will always hold dear. And we give thanks for a life lived with such gusto. Barbara Cousens, Alexandria, Virginia, USA

A tribute from Janet Beilstein

We were saddened to read of the passing of Sheena Duncan. As an Old Roedeanean, she epitomised the school's motto, "Inspiring a Life of Significance." She inspired generations of young women to become involved in anti-apartheid, human rights and gender equality struggles globally. She will be greatly missed. A tribute from Steve Burgess met

Sheena Duncan in 1975 on my first visit to Africa. Anne Wilson took me to Black Sash headquarters where we saw the work that was being done on behalf of victims of apartheid. Ms. Duncan inspired me to continue my work against apartheid and for human rights. Uli Albrecht.

A tribute from Betsy Oehrle, Durban

I concur with all the tributes that I have read to Sheena. I wish to add a cherished memory when she spoke after having received an honorary degree at UKZN. She said that corruption in South Africa could lead to our downfall. I have never forgotten this. Rest in peace great soul.

A tribute from Lesley Frescura

I am sure that your memories of Sheena must be many. I salute her for the incredible knowledge that she had on the law in apartheid South Africa, and how she used this knowledge to always be one step ahead in the advice offices. I remember her humour, her laughter at the annual Black Sash fetes in Johannesburg, her deep commitment to a gun-free South Africa, her talks to the paralegals who did their training at the BS office in Johannesburg, her friendships, and her steadfastness. Go well Sheena, that gravelly voice of yours will remain with us all, and infuse our memories of the Sash forever. Womandla!

A tribute from Philip Nichols

...thank you so much for letting me know about dear Sheena, a great woman who will be much missed. Several of my colleagues here knew her, so have told them, and we will remember her at the Lord's table when we celebrate the Holy Communion.

A tribute from Nirupa Sing

Sheena had a full life and leaves a legacy.

A tribute from Andrew Mukandila

...Sheena Duncan will remain an icon on fight against injustice. Thanks God for the gift of life in Duncan on earth.

A tribute from Dan Pretorius

Sad to hear about Sheena, I also remember her voice quite distinctly.

A tribute from Vertrees Malherbe

Daughter of a Black Sash founder - Jean Sinclair - Sheena seemed endowed with special gifts when it came to seeing the big picture during the apartheid era. Geoff Budlender has paid tribute to her extraordinary grasp of the law (though not a lawyer), and those of us who attended annual conferences where she presided know how readily she understood the essentials, and assessed the potential, of the proposals which members presented. When change came, and the Black Sash changed with it, she knew that much remained to be done. I, for one, was grateful that she gave her name, and some of her amazing energy, to GunFree South Africa.

A tribute from the Black Sash Gauteng Provincial Office

Sheena was a peaceful fighter, a mentor, a guiding star, well of information, bedrock, a mother of the poor nation and a friend to those who were and are broken by the system of injustice. We will miss her and her contributions to our growth as an office.

A tribute from Philippa Sauvenier

I knew Sheena, through her daughters, from 1968. I knew what she stood for and how fearless she was, but did not know how much she meant to so many people in this country. Or quite just how much she had done. She had a truly remarkable energy and presence. She was also incredibly brave through her last weeks when she was in huge pain. I never heard her complain or say anything other than that she was getting on well. I was privileged to have known her. We must draw courage from her example, and keep her ideals alive. My love and best wishes to Lindsay and Carey.

A tribute from Glenda Glover

I was lucky enough to be part of the Southern Transvaal Branch and the Johannesburg advice office of the Black Sash under Sheena's leadership in the 1980s. How lucky I was to know and experience Sheena at work. If you needed a lesson in ethical strategy then you just needed to observe Sheena at work. She could touch your heart with the description of an image of a vulnerable young boy in a police station; she could get you to give your all simply by expecting you to; she could shine a clear light of understanding on murky issues; her sense of justice and fairness was tough, unwavering and

demanding; and she cooked wonderful food! For me Sheena was an educator and through her clear leadership she enabled a place for me to fight apartheid and to continue to fight for a fairer more peaceful world without compromise or compliance, and remaining in touch with the person behind the till at the corner cafe.

A tribute from Beva Runciman

It was from the lips of Sheena Duncan that I first heard the words 'civil disobedience'. Every time I heard Sheena speak was like an intellectual revolution because her mind and her work never remained static but developed new, sometimes dramatic aspects that were all laid before us to choose to develop if we so wished. Sheena never forced anyone to do anything. I believe she saw her own mission as prophetic and that telling the world about injustice was a religious commitment she made as her part of the struggle. The rich contributions and endless insights were ways for her to be of use. In this way, I believe Sheena lived out a rich and deep love of God and found a way to serve the dispossessed, the hungry and all those at risk. May you rest well into infinity and remain a guiding light to those of us left bereft.

A tribute from Chief Mahlangu

I would like to pass on my condolences to the Sash and Sheena's family.

A tribute from Priscilla Hall

Sheena agreed to hold a one-day workshop in Grahamstown to help troubleshoot problems around forced removals and put communities in better touch so that they could strategise together - always valuable in rural areas where they were under state pressure and isolated from each other.

A tribute from the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature

The Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature has passed a resolution on the 11th May 2010 in the House as a condolence to the passing on of the well known anti-apartheid stalwart, Sheena Duncan. Can you please assist with the address of her family as the Legislature would like to courier a message of support to the family. Your assistance will be appreciated.

A tribute from Jenny Sprong - DIAKONIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

I only knew Sheena by reputation – being twenty years her junior.

As a Christian feminist theologian I recognise that Sheena was one of the 'giants', on whose shoulders we have stood, as we worked towards gaining access to ordination in some Churches. Sheena contributed to the realisation of various levels of constitutional and human rights for women and, especially, for people of colour in South Africa. Sheena was outspoken and constantly challenged gender injustice. She worked tirelessly for full democracy and fairness in our land.

I honour you, Sheena, and pledge to continue to do whatever I can to bring about full gender equality in both church and society – may it be in my life time!

A tribute from SALAN Secretariat

We truly share the loss of Sheena – a Powerful and brave woman of our time. To the family we send our heartfelt condolences - SALAN Secretariat

A tribute from Marilyn Aitken, Reichenau Mission, Underberg

Please give my deepest sympathy and love to Sheena's daughters and to my friends in the Black Sash whom she leaves behind. As I sit here in Underberg thinking of Sheena, I find it hard not to be at the events to honour and bury her. I will miss her wit and her sharp critique of current events.

Many people probably don't know that in 1983, Sheena wrote the simplified version of the Catholic Bishops' Report on Namibia. We had it translated into 10 languages and disseminated thousands of copies in parishes throughout South Africa and Namibia so that ordinary people would know what was happening in Namibia. The Simplified Report that Sheena wrote was later banned and we believe that it was one of the nails in Apartheid's coffin.

Sheena also worked on the production of a film on Forced Removals "And now we have no land" with Harriet Gavshon, Paul Weinberg and Hennie Serfontein. That film, a joint production of the SABC and the SACC, also helped to open people's eyes to the atrocities of Apartheid.

Sheena is the embodiment for me of the concept of Lifelong Learning. She qualified as a domestic science teacher and ended her life as an "unqualified" lawyer. Sheena modelled for us how to be at the cutting edge of life. She found herself in an unjust situation where she needed to know the law. She set about educating herself with all the resources at her disposal and did this so expertly that attorneys and advocates alike consulted her regularly.

I mourn your passing Sheena, but your work continues in all those people you empowered. May the angels accompany you into the paradise you so richly deserve. We will meet in Galilee. "EGalilee, EGalilee, sohlangana EGalilee".

A tribute from Ann Colvin for Sheena Duncan at her memorial service in Durban on 17 May 2010

In my brief introduction, I admit to a very personal tribute to Sheena as indeed each and everyone of you will likewise have your own memoir, which doubtless explains your presence here tonight and we thank you for honoring this occasion.

For me, Sheena was the reason why I chose not to flee the country. That was way back in the early 1970s, not long after our return to the land of my birth, having spent my married life abroad.

It was the experience of being confronted, first hand, by a legalized social system that was so manifestly and brutally unjust, to the extent that I felt I either had to quit the country or else find a way, somehow or other, of registering my revulsion.

And so it was that, having heard of the Black Sash and learnt that Mary Grice was its then Chairperson in Durban, that I got into my car and drove to Everton, knocked on Mary's door and asked to join the Black Sash.

I mention this because from then on and thereafter Sheena, for me, became not only an inspirational leader, colleague and friend but, in addition, she possessed the rare and remarkable qualities of an exceptional human being, a formidable opponent of injustice and, as we all know, a courageous South African.

And if I might quote from Alistair Spark's latest book, "First Drafts", in a moving tribute to the Reverend Beyers Naude (And here I might add that for their generous and unfailing support both Beyers Naude and Archbishop Hurley were made Honorary Members of the Black Sash), Sparks writes: "They were special people, the likes of these white activists who stood up to oppose apartheid. They did as much as anyone to bring about change in our country for they sowed the seeds of doubt in white minds that prevented white opinion from congealing into a consensus of resistance."

Furthermore, Sparks continues: "It is one thing to show great courage and sacrifice in leading one's own people to freedom, but it takes a special kind of commitment to do that on behalf of people other than one's own."

With Sheena very much in mind, clearly for me the operative word here is "lead" for it was that sheer strength of that aforementioned commitment that Sheena, but example, led. An example motivated by compassion and concern for those of her fellow citizens denied justice – were it social, political or economic.

Sheena's integrity can best be summed up in the words of that other great South African, Fredrick Van Zyl Slabbert who said to his children, Tania and Riko: "No matter how much we achieve in the world, if we cannot see ourselves in the eyes of a beggar on the street corner, then we have achieved nothing." (From their introduction to the book "The Passion for Reason. Essays in honour of Fredrick Van Zyl Slabbert".