

## Sheena Duncan

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.

In 1986 she received the Liberal International Prize for Freedom for her outstanding contribution to human rights and political freedom. She was awarded the Order of Simon of Cyrene by the Anglican Church, and in 2006 she was made Grand Counsellor of the Order of the Baobab (in silver) for her excellent contribution to the struggle for a non-sexist, just and democratic South Africa. She has received honorary doctorates in Law from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1990, the University of Cape Town in 1991 and the University of Natal in 1995.

She was born in Johannesburg in November 1932, the eldest of five children. She was married to Neil Duncan, who predeceased her, and they leave two daughters, Lindsay and Carey, and two grandchildren.

Sheena was a person of enormous integrity and commitment. She was a dedicated and meticulous worker in the Black Sash's Johannesburg Advice Office, where people came to seek her counsel, where she learned daily of the sufferings of African citizens under the repressive laws of apartheid, and where journalists, diplomats, political analysts and lawyers came for first-hand experience of the results of that injustice.

Her leadership of the organisation came not only from her wide knowledge and understanding, but also from the warmth and humour of her involvement. From every region come memories of her concern for all parts of the country, of the way she would telephone whenever there were crises or problems, of her offering comfort and strength.

She became the leading expert in understanding the impact of the pass laws, analysing their effect and exposing their cruelty and absurdity. In 1978, for example, she examined at length the implications of the laws making South Africans into citizens of Transkei and Bophutatswana: in meticulous detail she pointed out the ways in which people would be deprived of such rights as they still had to live and work in South Africa; she demonstrated how the majority of white South Africans had no idea of the consequences of these laws, drawing attention to the fact that even General Magnus Malan had called for blacks to be accepted into commando units of the Defence Force and asking 'surely he cannot contemplate an army consisting of foreign mercenaries?'

There are countless other examples of how she understood the implications and likely consequences of laws being introduced, and found ways of making others understand, and enabling the Black Sash to express its protests.

Equally important was her commitment to finding peaceful ways of opposing oppression and injustice. In a powerful address in early 1986, mourning the recent deaths of hundreds of people, including members of the Black Sash, she responded strongly to a speech by State President Botha: 'He must know that his political clique long ago destroyed the sovereignty of law as the basis for the protection of the fundamental rights of individuals. He must know

that there is no peace, freedom or democracy in South Africaí He knows that the dignity of his fellow citizens is violated every day, that life is not protected, that property is not protected, but that laws made by white people in South Africa have wrenched from tens of thousands of black people the land they owned and used and the homes they occupiedö. She went on to say that civil disobedience was the one small hope left, exemplified by those political movements and black communities who had withdrawn their cooperation from the apartheid state. öCivil disobedience is not to be undertaken lightly but only in deep respect for the idea of law. All societies need a framework of law in which people can know what it is to be free. It is the law which is necessary to uphold justice and democracy and peace in free societiesö. She encouraged the Black Sash to öwork hard enough, be committed enough, do enough, to choose the ways which will build a new just and peaceful society for our common futureö.

This will be her legacy: an enduring commitment to work for justice, an unshaken faith in peaceful ways of doing so, a warm and courageous heart for supporting those who suffer. She will not be forgotten.

Mary Burton,  
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