

MPUMLWANA, THOKO, 23 February 2021, Johannesburg

Interviewer: Anne Mager. AM

Interviewee: Thoko Mpumlwana. TM

AM Okay, good afternoon...

TM Good afternoon. Thank you so much for having me.

AM And thank you so much for agreeing to talk with the Banned Persons Memory Project. So, we're with Thoko Mpumlwana, and I am Anne Mager, and Paula Ensor is helping us to set things up, and she may well come in with a question or two at the end. Okay, so we start with the background questions, Thoko. If I may call you Thoko, is that okay?

TM That's fine, absolutely, absolutely, that's my name (laughs).

AM (Laughs). Okay. All right, so, where were you born, what were the circumstances when you were growing up, and how did you come to some sort of political consciousness?

TM I was born in KZN right at a place called Melmoth in Zululand, those days it was called Zululand, very far. And the question will be, what did you want there? My father was a priest in the United Congregational Church, and that's where they were sent by the church to go and have their ministry.

And so, that's where I was born. And then from there the family moved from there and it went to Hibberdene. Hibberdene is a place in KZN as well, but in South Coast. Then we went to the South Coast where my father was also sent by the church.

The practise of the church those days actually is that the church would decide where you go, but the congregation must agree that you go. So, he had a gift, my father in particular, of building church structures, he was a very gifted person. My mother, who had a very strong influence on me, was also very active in the church.

My mother was an educator [school teacher] but I think you will recall that those days if you got married, you lost your full-time status as an educator. And so, she became a housewife and had to find means of helping the family because being a priest, especially those days, and I think even these days, it depends entirely on the goodness of the congregation.

00:03:08

And so, in poor communities where my father had a sense of being called, for us to eat we had to plant food, and my mother had to supplement income by sewing and doing every other possible way of earning money like making sandwiches for school kids and selling this and that, but she was also extremely active in the women's movement in the church. That's where I grew up. And then from there we then moved to KwaMashu, an urban area in Durban.

KwaMashu was a township that had just opened after the removals of people from Cato Manor, and they were trying to put them in townships. Some would go to KwaMashu, others would go to Umlazi, so, people were being moved from all the areas for white people to settle.

So, my father was called to KwaMashu to start a parish there, and so we stayed there for quite a while at KwaMashu in Durban, and we also had a parish there. That's where I grew up. And then, in fact if I may just correct myself, it was the other way round. It was first KwaMashu and then Hibberdene.

From there I then went to Inanda Seminary because I was just lucky because it was a privilege of being a pastor's daughter to go to a girls' school. It was quite - still is today - a privately-run girls' school so we were able to get education because we got a bursary at least, almost 80% reduction in fees, the rest was paid by the school, and my father would have to make means.

And those days fees were not so expensive so he could throw in a few R10 here and a R10 there until he finished paying the fees. So, that's where I then went to high school. I had two brothers who have passed now, I was the last one, the only girl in the family. And if we were to ask, where did I get my awareness?

00:06:01

My parents were not very unaware. My parents, especially my mother, was an active, especially because she was involved in the Women's Movement, YWCA, and later, and I got to know that actually they worked together with Brigalia Bam. I was not aware, but our lines crossed later, and she told me that she used to work with my mother.

But also because the United Congregational Church was involved with what one would call the, at the time it was called American Board Church actually, and then it became United Congregational Church. But it was an aware church because of the civil rights movement in the US.

So, my parents were quite mindful of political issues. And the upbringing of my father who tells the story of their absolute poverty, I think strengthened him to feel very strongly about social justices, which actually was even part of his calling to the church just to give people hope.

And he used to say, the church made me and I would like the church to make other people because were it not for the church I probably wouldn't have been where I am. Because there were very many in the family, but he found himself with a family, the parents dying early, looking after the entire family and their siblings. So, that's how I grew up. Inanda Seminary, yes, you want to follow up on that?

AM Yes, I wanted to ask a little bit more. So, did you have political discussions in the home, or was this simply the example of your parents that influenced you?

TM To be honest, I wouldn't say we had political discussions, but it was the examples of the way they worked, and the work they did. As children, I think

those days to be honest, there were no discussions around the table on serious issues.

I guess they were protecting us from the harshness of life. I always tell people that those days we can't even go to funerals. So, I think it was just a way of saying, you are still children, you'll get to know how harsh the world is. But the world, they couldn't hide it for too long, because we would overhear them discussing matters with other elders, and I would hear them, listen very carefully.

00:09:09

And for instance the first time I heard, I have a dream of Martin Luther, was when they were playing it with other adults. And I listened carefully. It made sense to me. And also, we used to have a lot of discussion about civil rights movement and injustice issues on just how to live a just life and how to be fair to others at home.

And so, I think it was a way of them preparing us for the reality of what we were going to see as our eyes got opened. And my mother was also, and my father was a leader of Boy Scouts and my mother was a leader in Girl Guides. So, even there, that's how we really got to get to hear a little more.

And I remember, we had a discussion about the motto that used to say, I honour the Queen and all that and so on, and my country. So, it was a very serious discussion at Girl Guides now - where, which country? And which queen? But the training itself was about leadership, but the issues could not be escaped. And we discussed them when we were in Girl Guides. But also, I'm grateful because it is those involvements that imbued in me some values about choices in life and things that matter in life. Then at Inanda...

AM Sorry, no, continue.

TM At Inanda Seminary, my first brush with serious political stuff was when at Inanda Seminary, I believe Inanda gave me introduction into politics indirectly in that we were visited in the '80s, in the '80s, I think it must have been '86 or '87, we were visited by a group of actors who came to talk to us, to educate us about the Arts.

00:12:02

And they did a play with us. And the group was called Tecon, T E C O N. And in that group was Strini Moodley, was Strini and his wife, and a few others who were there. And when we listened, it was all political, and it was about justice, it was about being black and the challenges of being black. And being in an institution that empowered us to be the best that we could, then our eyes were opened to how we live in an unjust society.

So, and we actually started our own discussions at school. And thereafter another encounter was the visit by, I always tell Barney Pityana, he was not even aware, I said you planted the seed as well, because they came to visit us to address us at Inanda Seminary, that was around 68, 69 about South African Students' Organisation, and just conscientising us about being black in South Africa. And now if you just oppose that to the fact that we had this play, it all

came together. So, some of us made those choices at that point that our life would not be divorced from the politics of the day. And the system was unjust so they [inaudible].

AM Okay, we've had a technical problem there I think. It seems to have frozen. Okay, can you hear me?

TM Has it frozen?

AM Ja, I...

TM Yes, I can hear you.

AM Okay. All right, so...

TM Yes, yes.

AM At this point...

TM The thing is, it's a bit unstable.

AM Okay, all right, we'll manage. So, these two particular visits by black consciousness leaders and cultural group were very important for you. And what influenced your decision to go to Fort Hare University after Inanda?

00:15:02

TM Interesting. I then, when I finished my high school. Oh, my parents then moved from South Coast to King William's Town in the Eastern Cape. My father was called to King William's Town, so we moved as a family. I think it was three years before I passed my matric, I was doing my JC we used to call it at the time, these days called grade ten. And so, they moved to the Eastern Cape.

It was just a logical thing for me to go to Fort Hare and because those days, in fact, Fort Hare was one of the best institutions for black students. At least we knew that you'll get a good education in terms of its status, to be honest. The others, we also knew them to be okay, but the history of Fort Hare was drawing us.

But the real reason for me was that it was cheaper for me, there wasn't any need to travel, and so, it was just taking a taxi or a train from King William's Town to Alice. But at that time my mother also had passed away, so it was more convenient for me to come home during weekends. Because whilst my father was a good man, patriarchy had not assisted him to know how to take care of him. So, (laughs), so he was, I think he was so unhappy and depressed that he did not mind just not cooking, and so it bothered me.

So, Fort Hare was the best place to be that at least I can go home, cook for him, leave some food and go back to school, to university over weekends. So, that's how I went to Fort Hare, and I don't regret actually. I think it was a very good foundation. It flowed very well with who I was and the types of people I met there.

AM Okay. So, at Fort Hare, clearly you were politically involved and presumably joined the South African Students' Organisation. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience?

TM Yes, by the time we came to Fort Hare, being politically aware, and the network being political when I arrived at Fort Hare, it was a logical thing to join SASO formally. And we were quite active in mobilising for SASO on campus. And also to deal with - sometimes even food was political, the type of food we had to eat because it clearly didn't give us the dignity we required.

00:18:31

But also it was a way of mobilising for the bigger things that we required, which was justice. And the other issue that was important was student leadership. I mean those days we're even fighting over the council, Students Council which was not allowed those days, or they would select people, and absolute apartheid discrimination.

Yes, government institution of course, in terms of the people that went there and the history. But apartheid had worked very hard to make sure that that legacy is killed by who they sent there to lead these institutions, to make sure that the purposes of these institutions and the quality and the legacy of these institutions was killed, and these institutions are made to promote apartheid.

So, there was a lot of resistance, even to the leadership at the time to tell them that we don't recognise you actually. You may be here but we frankly don't recognise you, because you are not here in the interests of all and justice, but you have been placed here to transform us into something we refuse to be.

AM Okay...

TM So we got [inaudible].

AM Right, so you've mentioned food and leadership and so on. Presumably Bantu education was also a big issue at the time?

TM Absolutely, absolutely. The issue of the system itself and the education we were getting there. And of course we also, as you get involved, we also saw how apartheid was being practised. White lecturers would take their cars after work and drive to Fort Beaufort, and stay in the city there.

And the black ones would have to stay on campus, or live in Alice. So, there was absolute discrimination, and which we refused to accept at the time. And we then reached a point when the strike in 1972 was so strong. And of course next to us we also have, if I may just say, the Federal Theological Seminary, which was also very useful in giving us the support we needed.

00:21:17

Because there were people there who would, some of the meetings, because we couldn't have them on campus, we would have them at the Federal Theological Seminary. And then Fed Sem we used to call it, was then closed. Yes, it was closed, and the reason for closing it was political, nothing else.

They wanted it away from Fort Hare (laughs). So, they closed it. And so, we had a strike even about that, and of course in addition to our own strikes. But that relationship between Fort Hare activism and the Federal Theological Seminary was such that even the police with their dogs and everything could not...

And those days they didn't have the water cannons and all that, but they would whip us hopefully in line, and it still did not work. And at some point they then, in the last strike, they closed the university and then they decided who's coming back and who's not coming back.

And some of us were told not to come back to Fort Hare. That was in 1972. So, we were expelled, I was expelled in 1972. So, those days, when you were expelled for political reasons, they would then make sure you don't go to any other institution.

And for some people that could still go to other institutions, so, even amongst us the divide and rule was such that they would make sure that some have the privilege to go elsewhere, others don't have the privilege to go elsewhere. So, then we went home after the strike, and other people were called back, we were not called back.

And so, my father said, they aren't going to take you, I want to know why they are not taking you. So, we went there. Of course, I didn't want to, I was kicking and screaming saying, I don't want to go. But my father said, you have a right to education, I want them to tell me why.

So, we went there and of course there's no reason, you know they will consent to say they are political. And my father said, but I've sent the child to school, your job is to educate her (laughs). And so, ja, so, then they said no, we can't have her.

00:24:25

Clearly the rector did not have the right to decide. It was the security forces who were deciding these things. So, he said I'm sorry, I can't help you. And my father said, so where do you think I should take her? Because you are not even saying that she can go to another school like the others.

She says, well, it is the best I can do for you, it is now a privilege to my father, is to write a letter to say, at least you can go and study from home under UNISA. So, I couldn't go to any educational institution. So, I registered at home with the University of South Africa.

Luckily they admitted me, but I can assure you, they were all working together at the time, but they admitted me, so I studied. I went back to stay in King William's Town, and when I was in King William's Town, that's where the head office of the Black Consciousness Movement was.

So, I went there to offer my voluntary services to keep myself active and busy because I was really just sitting at home and not doing anything. And so, I was given a position to be a researcher to assist with research. I was just doing my first year at university, but then I was given a position to be a researcher. That

can tell you how things were. (laughs) And I had to do it. But it worked because we did the *Black Review* that was the project I got involved in to collect information for *Black Review*. And so, I offered my services and at some point they then employed me, and one thing led to another. So...

AM So *Black Review* was an annual publication? Sorry, Thoko, was *Black Review* an annual publication?

TM Yes.

AM Okay.

TM *Black Review* was an annual publication that we'd produce to analyse where black people are in society, to celebrate black excellence, to lift out black challenges like chapters that would deal with unions for instance, detentions, every year we would say so many people this year have been detained.

00:27:27

And so, we would make sure that we do it annually so that we keep the issues hot on the table, and not under the table through *Black Review*. Of course, as you know, what the system would do then would just to keep banning it. So, if we had a person who does it, then they were banning the person, so that the person doesn't do, and then the next one becomes an editor.

That's how I became an editor because Malusi [Mpumlwana], who was the editor, got banned before me. And after that I got banned. And then Asha Rambally also got banned. So, that's how they did it until 1977, when they banned all organisations. And so, that's when Leopold Street, by then it's gone and those people had been banned, and they banned all organisations, and we closed and had to start other projects thereafter.

AM Okay, so, when you say Malusi, you mean your husband?

TM Yes, my husband Malusi. We worked together, yes.

AM So, you met him at this time when you were both in the office in King William's Town?

TM In King William's Town, yes. We did research together.

AM Wonderful. So, this period then - you were banned, your organisation, your organisational work was banned. You personally, were you banned at the same time or was there a slightly different process?

TM I was banned around the same time. To be honest some of the things we just wipe out, I do not have the exact date. But I know it was around the same time as, I think around '77, if my memory serves me well. But what I recall was that at that time we could not do any work that is written. So, the banning order would say -. Of course it all started with detentions. They would detain you. My detention was not the section 61. There were two types as you know. There was a tough one where they would interrogate you and torture you and so on, and then there was a section 10 which they called it preventative.

00:30:34

So, if they think that you might influence against the state, they call it they're preventing you from having any influence. And the preventative detention meant you were taken in and, but they don't interrogate you, you just stay in jail, which is what they did.

Of course those as they detained you, like they did with me, they would still be very angry with you and beat you up for being who you are, cheeky blacks, and so they then would detain you. They detained us in Grahamstown and they detained us in King William's Town.

It was then - the confusion of the dates in my mind is that at some point when we were outside now, when I got my banning order - there wasn't much I could do. My banning order was actually a difficult one in that with mine, when they gave me the banning order, they also said I had to report to the police station once a week.

Every Monday between, I think it was between 8.00am and 3.00pm I had to report to the police station. They didn't want me to skip the country, they were tired of people who were skipping the country. And Malusi was in prison at the time. In most cases he was in prison when they started my stricter banning order.

And so, I'd report once a day and they would just, and we lived in Zwelitsha in the township and they would just harass you. You know, the idea was to break you, harass you, make you unacceptable in the community because you're a bad person.

00:33:01

And people would be afraid to talk to you, not because they don't know you, but because it's for their own safety, they don't want to be arrested as well. So, but I think the energy we had and the solidarity we had with each other as activists, and the commitment to the cause was so strong that I just do not remember being depressed that I'm banned. Actually, it made me proud that I'm banned. It was inconvenient, and the more it was inconvenient was the more I felt this I will fight because it's unjust. So, I went through that.

When the Ciskei government got its independence, that is when we declared ourselves unbanned. We said, okay, now we live in Zwelitsha, it is an independent country, so we are not banned.

AM (Laughs).

TM And so, we unbanned ourselves, told everyone we are not banned now, so we do things. And very quickly the letter came to say, you are now unbanned (laughs), because they realised now that it can't work. If they declare Ciskei an independent country, and we live in Zwelitsha, then we are not banned, because now we live in another country. And so, that was the funny one and they realised this one has caught us, and so they unbanned us.

AM So, you continued to work with the programmes of the Black Community Programmes at this point? Or were you...

TM What happened, they banned all those programmes, all of them could not proceed. And so, what we did then, we chose one of the many that were there, the ones that worked with young people, and we would try to combine the content of the others of conscientising. So, we started a bursary scheme.

And we named it Zingisa which means to be patient, to keep at it even against all odds. So, we started that bursary fund. And with the assistance of the first fund was endorsed by Father Aelred Stubbs who helped us write our first proposal. They'd taken everything, so, the first proposal was literally handwritten.

00:36:15

And so, I wrote the first proposal to say we wanted to continue with that project because we believed black kids have a right to education and we are building leaders and of course we wouldn't say that also we want to use it as conscientisation platform to select leaders of tomorrow and leaders, young people who will be socially conscious and who will be on the side of justice, which is what we did with Zingisa. So, amongst all, that's the only one that we - we couldn't continue with any of the ones that included writing, because those ones required that we write and obviously we couldn't publish.

AM So, Zingisa started as the Ginsberg Educational Trust?

TM Yes.

AM And that's what you transformed, if you like, later?

TM Yes, yes, yes. And to something bigger than just Ginsberg.

AM Okay.

TM Ja, it was bigger because it then included virtually the whole of what we'd call now Eastern Cape.

AM About how many students were you able to support at a time?

TM Hey, do you know, I can't even remember, but it's hard. We had different programmes. Maybe I must first describe how we operated. We gave bursaries, but we also had programmes for young people who did not necessarily have bursaries with us. Like winter schools, like Saturday programmes, like interaction of whatever nature. So, but for bursaries I really can't remember how many we did, but I know that there were times when we'd have more than 30 students at the time.

AM Okay. And at this point Malusi's been released from prison?

TM Yes. At this time Malusi was released from prison. We got married on the 31st of December, and when he got released we then... Oh he got released, we were in prison and he got released before me. Because what they would do, say obviously, by detaining this one for three months we'll keep them for three months. So, he went in earlier than me, and he was released three days after

me. And it was in 1976 that we got married. So, when he was released, he then went to his family to say, I don't know what is going to happen, could we make sure that when she comes out, we get married?

00:39:49

So, I was able to get a little note from him that when we leave here, we must get married. And I said, yes, because we don't know what will happen (laughs). So, when I came out, most arrangements had been made with family, my family and his family had been to my family. And so, the marriage happened on the 31st of December.

It was not the choice, our choice, but because we were banned people at the time, it was because you had to ask for permission to have a gathering. And so, for us to have more, you couldn't have more than one person. So, to have our families, the pastor and our family and witnesses and so on, you had to have an event, even if it's ten of you. So, we applied to get married. And I think they wanted to just spite us, to say let's make them get married on the 31st when there aren't many people.

And we were so excited, it made no difference, we still got married, and on the 31st, and family came. Of course it wasn't a big hullabaloo white wedding and so on. We just wanted to say our vows and be married. And so, that's how we got married.

AM Lovely story. So, now at some point you finish your UNISA degree and you become a teacher, is that correct?

TM Yes. I finished my UNISA degree which I had started after I'd been expelled, and of course there'll be times when there isn't enough money, so I'll pause a bit and then continue. But finally, I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree with UNISA, and then I registered for a Higher Diploma in Education.

00:42:34

I guess it was just wishful thinking, because now that I think about it, they could even have banned me again. And I would not be able to teach because with the banning orders, we were not allowed to go anywhere near an educational institution.

But I chose education. And at that time as well, Malusi had gone to the seminary to study Theology, and so the two came very well together. So, I said well, I will also pursue my studies in education which is what then happened, I did that. And I think Zingisa really gave me the passion to work with young people, because we achieved so much with those young people.

Because those were the days when there wasn't much, you know there wasn't much in some of these schools. And so, we did more than just pass, we did, we did. We helped them understand who they are, and why they have to get their education, and why it is important to have a just society, and where they see their role. And so do some of this in addition to, of course, helping them with making sure they pass, we also did all these other empowerment sessions. And I

thought this is what I like doing, I like to empower young people, and so, that's why I pursued education.

00:44:27

AM So, you did get a teaching job in the mid-'80s, is that right?

TM Yes, I got my teaching job, my first teaching job actually was in KZN [KwaZulu-Natal] because Malusi was at the seminary there, so, and I was just starting with my BEd. And with a BEd, it was not a full-time BEd, it was split over two years, so, you could take a job and take it part-time, which is what I did, because I was student and at that time, we really needed money.

00:45:13

Because when we were banned we really lived on the goodness of people, of organisations like SACC, of churches who would give you money to be able to feed your children, because we were not working, we didn't have any source of income.

And if you come from a poor family, you don't even have a family member who can support you, so you can get a little bit from your family. But you make your choice to be political, you can't go back to your family that is struggling and say, we just felt we'd have to make our own means to survive.

So, we were helped by justice activists in the world to survive. So, when he went to the seminary and we had already unbanned ourselves, then I applied for a job. And I got a teaching job and so we will be able to then at least survive on that teaching job and still be able to study.

AM Okay, so, we come then to the period of great change in South Africa, the early 1990s. I guess for a while you're still teaching, but there are now more options and you make choices and decisions. Tell us about the early '90s and how you saw yourself making a special contribution at that time.

TM From 'Maritzburg, then we went to live in Cape Town. I was still teaching, so I taught at New Crossroads, at Crossroads. Now Crossroads was, as you know, an area of turmoil, difficulties, very, very difficult, infiltrated by the police and by bad people, and influencing our people to kill each other. So, it was a very, very, very difficult environment. That's where I got a school to teach.

And then at the time there were professional organisations of teachers, but we decided that we wanted to start an activist organisation of teachers. So, we started a Democratic Teachers Union in Cape Town.

00:48:23

The chairperson was my principal, in fact he was a principal of a lower primary school next to us, but he was a very good organiser. And I was the secretary, and there's no secretaries. So, we started the movement of activist educators which then led to what we have today as SADTU. That was a choice, a very difficult choice, because then it meant even as educators now, we had professional bodies, but they were also, as is still the case today, different.

But ours was really to say, you cannot be a normal teacher in an abnormal society. You have to be an activist, and you have to have a purpose and you have to know that the higher goal of all of us is to destroy apartheid, and transform our society into a just society for all where black people have a right to lead and so on. So, we started that organisation.

And when we moved to, from then it is now my family that keeps moving, not where I grew up, but we then moved to Uitenhage. When I was in Uitenhage, the same story, you are a teacher. But when you are a teacher in a troubled society you are everything.

And those were the days, really and truly, where the system was very, very active in dividing black people. Very, very active in turning people against each other. So, you'd be at a school, and suddenly these kids would be split on strange political lines.

And at the time you had UDF, and of course you'd have those who are not in UDF, but who'd be in, say, AZAPO, who would be aligned to PAC. So, they are not in UDF, but it doesn't mean they are not political, it doesn't mean their cause is the same. In Uitenhage, people were just killing each other.

00:51:17

They were such enemies. And we knew the state was fuelling this. And so, once you teach you also have to make children ask themselves very profound questions on what the purpose of the struggle is. Who is your real enemy? So, in Uitenhage, that was a real, real big challenge.

But one is very happy to say at some point they were able to come together. We had to have workshops to help them just think through politics, because it was very easy to be misled. So, they had to understand that, what are the politics of the left, what are the politics of the right? And what is the intention of government? What does government benefit in them being divided? And who is the real enemy? And it helped a lot because in the spaces where they're at school that was, but also Malusi in the community, that's what he was able to achieve as well to help the community unite.

So, and then Mandela, we were in Uitenhage when Mandela was released, and when the unbanning of organisations happened, and the joy was unbelievable, unbelievable. I tell people that, you know, we belong to the lucky generations, we've seen it all. There are people who will never be able to say, I've seen it all.

So, at that time, people were getting ready politically, you know. I was in the Women's League locally there, and people were beginning to look at what they want to do. And of course, you know, when the time comes for all people to say who, is the leader, and the exiles had come back, that's when I then said, you know, I actually want to study further. I wanted to do a Masters. I tried a Masters in Cape Town, it didn't work, with UCT. I really wanted to do a Masters, it just could not work. We were just too busy with lots of other things, it was not possible to come to classes and to do stuff. So, we then went to Grahamstown

because the church moved us there, but also Malusi studied a Pastoral NGO there, and had to do a stint of teaching at the College of Clergy there.

00:54:45

And then I got a scholarship to go and study and do my Masters with Kellogg Foundation. And so, I applied and I was lucky, I was selected. And I made a conscious choice not to go to parliament, even though we did a lot of work during the [Women's] National Coalition, but also with Women's Development Foundation to prepare women for leadership.

Because we said, if we don't prepare women for leadership, these men are going to just take over and forget. So the Coalition was important to make sure that there's a clear mobilisation of women across political parties. It was the best thing we ever did as women of South Africa, which is why all political parties could not not have women, even those that didn't want, they had to because of the peer pressure. Because we worked across all political to make sure that even if you are in the most conservative one, women must be there, women must be there. This freedom is not for men, it's for all people and women are the majority in this country, they must occupy those spaces.

But I chose not to go to parliament. I went to school and I actually even said to my husband, you know, we actually need to, for the sake of the children, and just have much more time with the children. So, he followed us. We went as a family to the US.

And actually it was - the kids say, it was just the best time to come home even if you were studying, but we knew we would all be sleeping together in one room and we would be secure, we wouldn't be fearing what they would have to fear in the past, police coming in in the night, and all sorts of things. And, so, it was real transition for us. And when I finished, I came back home.

00:57:21

AM You did a Masters in Education?

TM In Education, a Masters in Education. And then when I finished I came back to South Africa. And the intention was to teach in Grahamstown, because I'd taken a leave of absence, a leave without pay, but I'd said I want to come back to my school. But then we just changed and we came to Gauteng.

At the time, Malusi was very lucky actually. He used to volunteer and do some stints with them at Kellogg Foundation and help them with training. And they then said we actually want to have a director in Africa, and we would like to consider you, would you like to apply? And he applied and got the post.

But the post sent him to Zimbabwe, that's where the office was. And so, I said it's too far, so, let's then move and stay in Jo'burg so that you can fly home during weekends (laughs) and see us. We can't do this to the children again. And so, that's how we came to Jo'burg. It was just coincidence. And we came and lived in Pretoria.

The reason we didn't go to Johannesburg was that we were just afraid of a big city. We thought Pretoria was small (laughs), because both of us are rural, and small city-minded (laughs). So, that's how we came to Pretoria. There wasn't any other reason (laughs).

AM (Laughs).

TM And then I got a job with HSRC to help them with a project called Women in Research. We were a very small team, but we were trying to help women in higher education to be interested in doing research. And we had to literally talk with them about what prevents them from doing research, what are the obstacles and what can be done to remove the obstacles.

01:00:01

And we even went as far as saying maybe we should do group research and that way people begin to have the confidence to do research on their own. So, that's, we did Women in Research under HSRC. And then I got an opportunity at the IEC.

AM The Independent Electoral Commission?

TM Electoral Commission. Yes, the Independent Electoral Commission. And when I applied I really was just saying, let me see if I can do it. In fact a friend said, there's something I think you might like to do, you know, we want people with an experience in mobilising people and women. Please apply.

And Dr Bam had also applied, and a few others. And I am told, and then of course I was shortlisted, I couldn't believe it because I thought you had to have things that were done by judges. I thought I'm just taking a chance here. But in our women's movement we've always said to ourselves, never say you can't do it.

Don't allow that attitude, because that's exactly what patriarchy has told us over years. If you are black, you are a woman, black, you can't do it, now a woman, you can't do it. Precisely for that, try it and see if you won't succeed. You'll be surprised at yourself. So, that was the reason I applied.

I just said, who says I can't apply? And I was shortlisted. And in the interview, someone, I was the last one on the list of people to be interviewed. And the one before me, I think it was Mr Kehla Shubane, if I can still remember, did not show up.

And so, the people who were interviewing me now used his time and my time. I had the longest, longest grilling in that interview and I came out there saying, you know what, you did your best (laughs). I said, that was a difficult interview. But I'd really prepared for the interview, and so it was open to the public, and the TV was there. It was all just so intimidating. But I refused to be intimidated and so I got that one. It was an absolute honour to serve in that organisation, an absolute, absolute honour.

01:03:05

AM Okay, so, you set South Africa on the road to democracy through the Independent Electoral Commission?

TM That's why I think it was an honour to be given that opportunity. And I used to say it all the time to the colleagues, that to be given an opportunity to set up systems for that Chapter nine [of the SA Constitution] institution that is intended to have everyone buy into it, was an honour.

It wasn't easy at the beginning because there was so much mistrust caused by our divisions of the past. But as time went on we really got the confidence of South Africans at the time, and in our diversity to run the elections. So I'm grateful we were able to do that.

AM Okay, and then subsequently you went on to serve on the Gender and Equality Commission?

TM Yes. Subsequent to that I went to the Gender Equality Commission. When I finished at the IEC someone asked me, I can't even remember, so what would you like to do? I said, I would like to be in the space of gender. That would be my last, I feel that's the space, even though I did that at the IEC, mobilising women and so on, but I would really, really love to be in the space of women empowerment, and infusing issues of gender in our society, and gender justice.

And so, again there was an opportunity, because in these institutions there are terms that are fixed, you can't go beyond a term. Most of them you serve twice and then that's it. So, I applied and we were interviewed by parliament, a committee in parliament, and shortlisted, and again had the honour of being selected to serve in the Commission for Gender Equality.

Tougher actually than IEC. Even though I thought IEC was difficult, I just found that working in the gender space, even today, is tough. It's difficult, it's just one area where patriarchy is still strong, very, very strong, and there are many issues that impact very strongly on women. And to be able to promote equality of women in a patriarchal society is not easy, but we did the best we could.

01:06:41

AM Okay, and the extraordinary contribution. So, I must ask this question. Is there anything you would have done differently? You've made this great contribution over many years, and there are many things we haven't touched on. But is there anything you would do differently, or would have done differently knowing what you know now?

TM You know, I don't think so. I look back and I say, I was lucky to be in all the spaces that made me who I am, and that made me contribute in the way I have in my society. I just don't regret it at all, at all, at all. I only say I'm grateful. I'm grateful for the universe, for putting me in spaces that just fulfilled what I believe in, and what I was brought up by my family to believe in, in terms of what you live for in society, or why you are here. So, I tell my children too that I don't even regret, I am sorry that I may have been not there all the time, because when you're an activist you're not there. My daughter, for instance, the eldest daughter, at some point I went with her to prison.

And I know it had an impact But I say to her, but look at where we are today that maybe if those sacrifices had not been made we wouldn't have a society. So, take it as your own contribution and say, through my mother and through what we did not get which we probably should have gotten, our society is where it is here. So, I think that I don't regret it.

AM Extraordinary. So, is there a message that you have for young people generally in South Africa today?

01:09:08

TM My message to young people in South Africa today is that we got given a country, we were put in this country for a purpose, and ours is to ask ourselves what we can do to build it. What can I as an individual do for myself and for my country, unselfishly, to make it a better place for others?

And I always say, your CV cannot achieve this and this and this, it must be I served here and here and here. I achieved this, and it contributed this and this to make society better. And the other important thing is that which I always say, is that you can never make it alone.

You make it through networks, you make it through being vulnerable, going to other people and saying, I don't know how to do it, I don't know where to go, I am struggling with this. You would be amazed how many doors can open if you make yourself vulnerable in order to improve on your situation and to improve the world in which we live.

AM Wonderful. Thank you so much, Thoko, you are an inspiration. That was just wonderful. Is there anything you would like to say that I haven't opened up in any way? Is there anything that you think I should have asked about?

TM I think maybe what I would like to just say before I stop is that, as human beings you always look back, and I say, you say, I thank those who were there before, for being where I am. There are many people who have worked hard for us to have taken the baton - parents, community members, activists, solidarity with the international world of people who believe in justice. Because were not for international solidarity it would have been an island that probably was never able to break down apartheid.

01:12:08

And so, I always say we should also be what other people were to us and be grateful to those who took us to where we are. And try to take the next step to the next level through the others that we will also mentor and support, and give opportunities to. And also live with values and principles of justice, of peace, of caring and honesty and integrity.

AM Thank you, thank you. Wonderful and such a privilege. Thank you for your time and for sharing this with us. Thank you.

TM Thank you.

AM Thanks Thoko.

TM Thank you. Thank you very much. Thanks.

01:13:09

Transcribed by Way with Words

Checked by Anne Mager