

26. Community H.E.A.R.T. – a better life for all

By Isobel Mc Vicar

I first met Denis when I was on a Scottish Anti-apartheid delegation to South Africa 6 months after the first democratic elections. At the time I was a trade union activist, in UNISON the public sector trade union, in the Housing Department of Glasgow City Council. The delegation was made up of trade unionists, councillors of all the major political parties in Scotland and Anti-apartheid activists. I was the youngest, at 33, and the most junior of the delegation, all the other trade unionists held national positions and some were senior members of the Scottish Trade Union Congress.

I was very excited by the prospect of visiting South Africa, our branch had been a major supporter of AAM in Scotland and had raised lots of money from our members for the ANC voter education programme and now to get the chance to visit the new democratic South Africa was a privilege. What I was not prepared for was meeting one of the Rivonia Trialists, Denis Goldberg, which was a life changing experience.

Our visit started in Cape Town, and during the couple of days in Cape Town we had many meetings with trade unions, government ministers and NGO's. One of the meetings with Cyril Ramaphosa, Secretary General of the ANC at the time, overran and a number of us had to leave early for our next visit to Rape Crisis Cape Town.

As we were waiting for all those attending the meeting with Rape Crisis Cape Town to gather a debate broke out among the women delegates about whether any men should be allowed to attend at all. I was in a minority arguing that since Denis had set up the meeting and

our hosts had not made this stipulation on the make-up of our delegation and so the three men should be allowed to attend. As a junior member of the delegation among women delegates who had much more experience, I was unsure I would be taken seriously. Then Denis joined us along with the other men who had asked to attend the meeting. Denis very gently pointed out that rape and violence against women was not just a problem for women in society but for men too, for society as a whole, to change things we must work together. The atmosphere changed and together we attended the meeting. It was not a matter of any of us being right or wrong: the senior women were going on their experience of how things worked in the UK. Denis's ability to encourage people to work together for change without alienating anyone had won the day.

In Port Elizabeth, we were again exposed to Denis's innate ability to bring people together, to encourage communication and build bonds. We were invited to a trade union meeting at a hospital by NEHAWU. I had never seen such a large meeting of ordinary trade union members, more than 200, just to meet a foreign delegation. As Denis was introduced to the meeting the South Africans leapt to their feet, "Amandla." It was sight to see. We were then given pride of place on the platform to enjoy a braai and music. The thing was there was no mingling at this point. The music was infectious and the South Africans were all dancing, I tried to get some of the women delegates to get up and dance (Scottish men are not known for getting up for a jig) but no-one would get up. The next thing I know Denis says he will get up to dance with me, that is all it took, everyone was up on the floor dancing, mingling, talking. When it was time to leave it took an hour to get out of the building as people, strangers hours ago, hugged and said their goodbyes! Stories had been told, understanding about the situation for ordinary South Africans established.

I will always be grateful that I spent this time with Denis and I am sure all others on the delegation would agree, even those who would not be of similar political beliefs. His passion to ensure equality for all and his understanding that the battle for democracy, though won, was just the end of one chapter in the struggle to build a new nation based on equality, the struggle must continue. I know I was not the only one

affected by Denis's ability to bring people together to promote change for the good and inspire a feeling that we must support the people of South Africa in their struggle. I believe it was also important that this was conveyed to those who had supported the struggle against apartheid, to realise it was not the end of the struggle and there was much still to do.

Denis's presence in the delegation had a profound effect on people and five months after the delegation came back and a year after the first democratic elections in South Africa, Community Health Education and Reconstruction Training (Community H.E.A.R.T.) was launched at the South Africa House in London. To my shock and delight I was invited to the launch, my first but not my last time in South Africa House. Three of the four founding members, of Community H.E.A.R.T. had been on the delegation, Brian Filling, Bob Bruce and Jane Coker. Others were instrumental in the first months of the organisation. Denis inspired so many people on the delegation not just to feel compassion but to do something about it.

The work began in earnest quickly after the launch. There had been two other UNISON activists, John McFadden and James Urquhart, on the delegation. They were both on the union's National Executive Council and were able to raise the issue of support for Community H.E.A.R.T. at a national level of the trade union. The UNISON delegates had written a report and were able to speak to activists about the need to support the struggle to overcome the legacy of apartheid and support Community H.E.A.R.T. as a vehicle to do this. The important thing about the organisation was, though it was a registered charity, it sought the views and ideas of the people in South Africa and this would shape its activity. It was not like so many other charities which decide what is "best" for the recipients; this was an organisation that would be shaped by the recipients. The establishment of Community H.E.A.R.T. was just the start of the journey and it led to Denis being invited to events around the country reaching more people, inspiring more people.

The thing about Denis is that he not only inspires but also has a way of making people feel that they have the ability to be a force for good, that every contribution to the struggle is important. I was not in

a high level position in the trade union but Denis made me feel I could make a difference at the beginning of the journey. Sometimes it was about trying to raise funds when my branch encouraged members to donate £1 a month through payroll, sometimes it was inviting other branches to an event to meet and hear Denis speak. Denis always made you feel each of these small things were important. I know I was not the only one who was doing what small thing they could do to help.

The Book and 10 Pence Campaign was one of the first campaigns Denis set up through Community H.E.A.R.T. and this came out of a discussion with South Africans involved in education. They wanted to inculcate an environment of reading in their young scholars but how could they do this when there was no access to books that they would enjoy. The idea was that as children had access to books they enjoyed reading so their literacy would improve and their school work would improve. The campaign would provide books to set up school libraries in South Africa. The idea was simple and I think Denis knew it would galvanise support in the UK but it would also have a huge impact on the life chances of the young recipients. The campaign would extend the reach of Community H.E.A.R.T. to the young people in the UK, reaching out to young people in schools, youth organisations and churches. Again Denis was bringing people together to change things for the better, this time young people in the UK.

The Woodcraft Folk were one of the young people's organisations that took up the campaign. This was the sort of international campaign they wanted to get involved in. Denis had been their Honorary President for some years until he suggested that it was a bit hierarchical. Many years later at a book launch in the UK of Denis's autobiography, *The Mission – A Life for Freedom in South Africa*, I met someone who had been a young person in the Woodcraft Folk. She was very excited about seeing Denis again and spoke to me of the impact Denis had on her as young Woodcraft member. That is the thing about Denis, he has a universal appeal, his ideas, his belief and passion appeal to the young, the middle aged and the old. I think it is the way Denis reaches out to people.

I remember some years ago he visited my daughter Roisin's primary school to promote the Book and 10 Pence Campaign. In a room full of 3 to 11 year olds, Denis started by asking them all if he could sit down to talk to them. As he sat down he asked what their favourite books were. The hands all went up in the air. The children felt comfortable, listened to and therefore willing to listen. I had watched the same children when the local Church of England priest had come to speak but there was little enthusiasm. I think the difference is they felt Denis wanted their opinion, not the opinion they were expected to give.

The goal of the Book and 10 Pence was to provide 1 million children's books to set up school libraries, which I remember thinking was a pretty tall order, but we will soon reach 3 million in no small part due to Denis. Of course Denis didn't collect and sort and pack them all himself, but the support from people was largely due to Denis. I do not think I have met anyone on meeting Denis who did not feel they must do something to support the struggle of the South African people to overcome the legacy of apartheid.

Denis attended every UNISON National Conference after 1994 until he returned to live in South Africa in 2002. It was at one of these early conferences I introduced him to the UNISON Manchester Branch. The Branch activists were captivated by Denis and his passion and charm and would later offer Community H.E.A.R.T. office space and storage space for the Book Campaign. I think Denis has this effect on people because they see this man who spent 22 years in prison and his only wish is to carry on working for a free and equal society, he has no pretensions, he wants a better life for all not the just the few.

By 1997 Denis and I were great friends meeting on his trips up to Scotland raising funds for Community H.E.A.R.T. and talking on the phone at regular intervals. It was during this year I got married to another trade union activist, Brian Stangoe, and moved to Manchester. To my great surprise, just before I moved to Manchester, Denis phoned me to ask if I would work for Community H.E.A.R.T. for 3 months and try and co-ordinate things in the north of the country particularly the Book and 10 Pence Campaign. Of course I was happy

to do so and the Manchester Branch activists were happy to provide the space. Denis was not like your usual kind of boss, as with other aspects of his life, he was interested in your ideas and what you had to say (perhaps others should take a leaf out of his book!).

We were in constant contact and Denis encouraged me to use my own initiative. As I said earlier Denis makes people feel a part of what is happening, no positive action to bring about change is too small to be encouraged. On the other hand he does not suffer fools gladly, those who have little positive to do or say will know how he feels about that. I remember a telephone conversation we had when he sounded quite down, he had been at a meeting talking about South Africa and Community H.E.A.R.T. It was only a few years after the first democratic elections and a woman in the audience berated the progress that had been made in South Africa saying little had happened as not everyone had an inside toilet. Denis had replied that it had taken decades for the UK to have inside toilets for everyone after universal suffrage; South Africa's democracy was only a few years old. I think he felt down about this because this was naked criticism devoid of any analysis or positive ideas. As I said Denis welcomes positive ideas and even constructive criticism but this was neither positive nor constructive; a waste of breath.

Denis's commitment to the struggle against apartheid was not diminished by the realisation of the first democratic elections. I believe his commitment intensified when it came to the struggle to overcome the legacy of apartheid and create a fair society for all the people of South Africa. This was about changing people's life chances, a new future for the children of South Africa. His commitment and passion were evident by the work he undertook in Community H.E.A.R.T. and the projects that were quickly supported. Rape Crisis Cape Town, the mobile science laboratory for schools in the deprived communities, the mobile clinic bringing inoculations for babies from these communities were all projects Denis raised funds for during the first years of Community H.E.A.R.T. He also attracted conscientious support for Community H.E.A.R.T. from others, including Nat and Elsa Perez and Mmapula Tladi Small to name but a few. His passion and commitment are infectious.

It was in 2002 that Denis decided to return to his beloved South Africa and take up a post of adviser to the Minister of Water and Forestry. I think most of us in the UK were saddened because we were so used to our friend and comrade being so close by but it was really just a continuation of the work he had been doing for most of his life and though saddened we all wished him well. During the spring of this year Denis asked if I would take over from him as Director of Community H.E.A.R.T. I have to say, though I appreciated his confidence in me, I was rather daunted by the prospect of having to follow Denis and live up to this confidence. Of course although Denis was thousands of miles away, he was always on the other end of the phone or email, with support and advice. In a way Denis never really left Community H.E.A.R.T., he became our President and has continued to support the work we do and support development work in South Africa. His commitment and passion for local projects in South Africa continued even when he had a full time job in government.

I think Denis will always be an activist in the true sense of the word, even after his “retirement” he has continued to get involved in projects on the ground in South Africa and has visited the UK on numerous occasions, helping raise funds for Community H.E.A.R.T. Two of the projects close to his heart are Ububele, a psychotherapy centre base in Alexandra Township, and the Kronendal Music Academy. These projects reflect where Denis’s passion lies, improving the life chances of young people, social cohesion and equality. Speaking to Denis recently he told me how happy he was to see women from all three communities in the Hout Bay area singing in the KMA women’s choir, something unheard of not so long ago.

The respect and fondness with which Denis is regarded in the UK can be illustrated by the number of people that attended the launches of his autobiography, the *Mission – A Life for Freedom in South Africa*, in the UK. There were over 300 people at the launch in the South African High Commission in London and there would have been more if the Icelandic volcanic cloud had not led to cancelled flights across the UK. Even so there were long queues for the signing and the speeches had to be delayed. There were many old comrades

and new and people from all walks of life, including the entire staff from our shipping agent. There were also launches in Glasgow, Manchester and the trade union, UNISON, annual delegate conference. At the UNISON conference, the launch was so overwhelmed by people that many had to stand outside only able to listen to Denis. We also ran out of books and had to have more couriered to us for people to pick up later on at the conference. It was also at this conference that Denis became only the third person to be given life membership of UNISON, the other two are Nelson Mandela and Aung San SuuKyi. It is the first time I have ever seen anyone get three standing ovations for one appearance at any conference.

Denis has a profound effect on all who meet him. As I have said throughout this piece whether it was the trade unionists in the Port Elizabeth, during the delegation to South Africa in 1994, rising to their feet shouting Amandla or the children in my daughters school, who were so enthused by Denis's visit or the UNISON Conference delegates rising 3 times for standing ovations, they are all touched by Denis and his commitment and passion for his fellow human beings.

As an Anti-Apartheid supporter in 1994, I was passionate about the cause. I was also passionate about the Palestinian cause but over the many years I have known Denis I have realised that is more than about the cause of anti-apartheid or the Palestinian cause or any of the other causes worthy of our support, it is a fundamental reality that to create a world that is fit for all to live in we must fight injustice wherever or whatever it is. Whether it is the freedom to vote, the right to education, the right to live in dignity no matter your race, gender, physical ability or sexual orientation, they are all important; they signify a truly civil society.

Denis has said winning freedom in South Africa was perhaps easier than building a nation. I know my mentor, friend and comrade, Denis, will do everything in his power to help build that free and equal South Africa.

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in October 1994. Since 1998 she has worked with Community H.E.A.R.T. and was called to be Director in July 2002.



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