

Tribute to Molly Blackburn

by Sheena Duncan
at the funeral
service

When Gavin phoned me last night to ask me to speak briefly this morning my mind went totally blank.

There are some things which are too deeply felt for any words and such is my sorrow. There are no words to say what we have all felt over the last days and what we are feeling now.

I went back to share with other Black Sash people who have come to Port Elizabeth from all over South Africa my feelings of inadequacy. One of them handed me an old envelope on which she had scribbled some words.

She says she writes things down when she hears them. She doesn't know where this comes from and she doesn't remember when she heard it but she has given me the words I needed.

This is what it says:

A warrior for justice had walked briefly in a troubled land, seeded the minds of men and women with new visions of themselves and changed the course of history.



Molly Blackburn with her husband Gavin and daughters Josephine (16, left) and Fenella (15)

courtesy of Fair Lady

Molly was such a one.

I have not known her for very long and I wish there had been more time for us. But there are some people whom one instantly recognises as great from the moment one meets them.

Molly was such a one — a truly great person.

Yesterday I opened the Black Sash magazine of May 1985 which reports on our national conference held here in Port Elizabeth last March.

There is a photograph of Brian Bishop taken in Namibia.

There is a photograph of Matthew Goniwe and one of Molly. All of them — 'Warriors for justice who walked briefly in a troubled land.'

They are all dead.

We weep today but we know that they have changed the course of history and their work will continue.

This is the tribute we pay to them — our commitment to go on trying

to follow them as 'warriors for justice' — our dedication to the cause they served.

We will not forget them and we will not be turned back from the path they trod.

Molly's death is a national as well as a bitterly felt personal tragedy.

All of us today reach out to comfort her husband, her children, her family, her friends, especially Di, and all the thousands of people who mourn her now.

There is a verse from the first psalm which is for our consolation:

And she shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth her fruit in season; her leaf shall also not wither; and whatsoever she doeth shall prosper.

In the shade of her tree we shall bring forth our fruit in due season and we will always seek to prosper the work she has begun.

A sister remembers . . .

It is two weeks today since the accident in which Molly and Brian were killed. After the funeral — that amazing and wonderful day when black and white wept, sang, danced and shared their sorrow — I found myself pondering often what it was that had turned Molly from an industrious, social housewife like so many others, into the phenomenon that swept 70 000 Uitenhage mourners to their feet, clenched fist raised, shouting 'Viva Molly'. When was the moment for her when she suddenly started to stride towards black South Africans with hands outstretched?

I can see that Molly possessed a fairly unique set of attributes. Having won the PFP Provincial Council seat for

Walmer in 1981 she had a platform which she could — and certainly did — use to put pressure on government bodies. She had an upbringing in which the pursuit of justice and liberal values were considered important. She had an attractive personality, a good speaking voice, lots of confidence and an acute and well-organised mind. She had always been determined and single-minded in her pursuit of a set goal. She had a husband who was very supportive as was her Member of Parliament. Other women (and men) have possessed most or even all of these qualities, so how did she differ?

She differed in that she gave herself to the black communities of the Eastern Cape. This has also been done

before, but added to the other qualities I have mentioned, the combination became unique. In our strife-torn, depressed and angry Eastern Cape she shone like the Star of Bethlehem.

As sisters go, we have always been very close, and I have always felt that I knew her pretty well, but in the past 18 months I have been awed by the way she grew in stature. And the tragedy is that I know, for her, this was just the beginning.

To go back quite a long way, Molly was born into a comfortable middle-class home in Port Elizabeth on November 12, 1930. I was born two years later. As children our relationship was not without its storms — from a tender age Molly asserted her leadership qualities, but even then for her, things always had to be 'fair'. I can never remember her telling a lie.

Our father, Buller Pagden, was a successful attorney;

And the tragedy is that I know, for her, this was just the beginning

our mother descended from 1820 Settler, Samuel Cawood. Our roots lie deep in Eastern Cape soil. As children, we lived in an atmosphere that was perhaps more enlightened than most. Our father was a far-sighted and clear-thinking man, numbering among his friends many politicians and political writers of the post-war period. Looking through a visitors book we had then, I see the signatures of Jan Hofmeyr, de Villiers Graaff, Hobart Houghton, A M Keppel-Jones, Alan Paton. One night I can remember Alan Paton having a tremendous argument with de Villiers Graaff over the latter's failure to come to grips with the real issues facing South Africa. Our father became regional director of Race Relations and was on the national executive of the Progressive Party after it broke away from the United Party.

Molly left the Collegiate School in 1947 with a first class matric and after four years graduated from Rhodes with a BA Degree. After travelling and teaching in London for a while she married an Englishman and settled in Belgium where she spent the next seven years of her life. On a visit to her at this time I took her a record of the rock musical, *King Kong*. I remember her sitting playing it, tears pouring down her face. 'You know,' she said to me, 'I am not going to be able to live away from the people of Africa for the rest of my life.' She was consumed with homesickness and seven years and three

presented.

During the 1977 general election we both worked flat out for the PFP, canvassing evening after evening, walking the streets of the Walmer constituency. One evening I remember her saying to me, 'You know, Jude, this isn't where it's all happening. You know where I'd really like to be? — finding out what's going on in the black communities. It's what's happening over there that's really going to count.' How out of touch such words must sound to Sash members who had been fighting the battle for justice for so long, but her time was yet to come.

Molly had to wait for another four years to make the first move in that direction. 1981 brought another general election and a victory for herself as Provincial Council candidate with Andrew Savage as her Parliamentary partner. She sold her estate agency and, in order to improve her political knowledge, she spent a year as or-

ganiser for the PFP, a job she did superbly.

Her first term as Provincial Councillor was frustrating and difficult. 'The Nats don't listen to a word Di or I say,' she complained. 'They sit with their feet up and snore. It's unbelievable.' Those first months were very trying, but she returned full of admiration and praise for her fellow councillors, and in particular, Di Bishop. Together they presented a team the Nat MPC's found they could not fail to acknowledge as courageous, tenacious, highly capable — and troublesome.

Di, although many years Molly's junior, had far more experience in fighting the bitter battle against apartheid. A Black Sash member since 1977, her training as a social worker had brought her into close contact with the terrible living conditions, deprivations and needs of the black South African.

Gradually the people of the townships began to learn that here was a woman who was ready to listen to their problems. The ensuing years, 1982/3/4 brought Molly increasingly into contact with the township communities, the whole of the Eastern Cape becoming her concern. She advised Matthew Goniwe in Cradock on how to form a Residents' Association and the calls began to come in from far and wide, 'How do we structure a committee?' 'We want to form a self-help group', 'We have so few taps, the roads are so terrible and the rents so high', 'My child has been taken by the police, he is only

'White South Africans think that the gap between black and white is too wide to be bridged, I don't think this is so. If you stretch out a loving hand, somewhere on the other side a loving hand will take it, and that will be the beginning of a bridge'

children later she returned to Port Elizabeth to live.

During the next two decades Molly remarried, this time to Dr Gavin Blackburn, had four more children and, in many ways typified the busy, suburban, South African housewife. Yet, looking back, she was gaining training and skills that were to equip her for the work she was finally to do with such consummate skill. She started off as an estate agent employee, and after some years acquired and ran a highly successful estate agency of her own. Juggling this career with four young children takes organisation and skill — but she loved the challenges it

13.' Cradock, Graaff-Reinet, Colesburg, Middelburg, Port Alfred, Jansenville, Somerset-East, Fort Beaufort, Steytlerville, De Aar, Cookhouse. The files are piled high now on Molly's desk.

November, 1984, brought with it the shooting by police of 19-year-old Madodane Tyuke in Port Alfred. The circumstances were horrifying and so was the indiscriminate shooting of mourners at his funeral. Twenty people were shot and subsequently charged with public violence. The Port Alfred community called on Molly for help and this was to be her first involvement in the

sort of mass police violence that was to be repeated time and time again in the Eastern Cape and throughout the country. Right from the start Molly kept meticulous records of all such incidents and any action she took was performed with the minimum of fuss and the maximum of effect. I am sure that it is in part due to her initial advice and continued watchfulness and concern that the 19 Port Alfred residents charged with public violence in this case were, on October 4, 1985, acquitted.

Those Sash members who were at the 1985 Conference in Port Elizabeth observed the vicious police behaviour first hand in the Uitenhage Charge Office. It was followed four days later by the Maduna Road Massacre in Langa, Uitenhage.

Molly was catapulted into the limelight. The TV cameras of the world focused on her, the phone never stopped ringing, visitors from far and wide poured into 13 Brighton Drive. She never allowed the publicity and continual attention of the media to get between her and the people she was trying to help. She attended to everything and everybody but the little people, with their often huge problems, always came first. It was at this time, too, that the death threats started coming in, usually at two or three in the morning. These never seemed to really frighten the Blackburn household, but were resented because they disrupted sleep.

I think we all know well the role Molly played during the rest of 1985, the intensification of pressure on us all, but particularly her when the State of Emergency was declared. She used to phone me every morning just after

seven and we would discuss the previous 24 hours, what her plans were, how I and other Sash members could help.

She worked in the Advice Office every Thursday morning and on those days the queue was half as long again. Attempts by the police to interfere with her work by arresting her or removing her township permit were viewed with impatience but did not hamper her.

She was asked to speak at meetings and rallies all over the country and her fluency and stature grew with each appearance. At funerals, and she only went if the communities invited her, she was often asked to speak and this she did so very well, finding the balance between a call for peace and an utter implacability and refusal to give in to the violence of the apartheid system. All over the township, graffiti bear witness to the peoples' acceptance of Molly's relevance to their cause — and the police concern over this acceptance.

These then were the foundation stones of the bridges Molly hoped, with help and her strong faith in God, to build. It is South Africa's tragedy that she will not be here to continue with that work. Her funeral was a testimony to the love and respect she had gained in so short a time from the black community. She said to me once, 'White South Africans think that the gap between black and white is too wide to be bridged. I don't think this is so. If you stretch out a loving hand, somewhere on the other side a loving hand will take it, and that will be the beginning of a bridge.'

Judy Chalmers

Brian Bishop

— a tribute by Mary Burton

For the majority of Black Sash members, contact with Brian Bishop came through Di. Some of us, however, had prior acquaintance and enjoyed working with him in the SA Institute of Race Relations or the Civil Rights League, or had met him as a fellow member of the Liberal Party. Brian gave generously of his time and concern to these organisations and made important contributions as chairman of the Civil Rights League and as chairman of the Cape Western Region of the SAIRR.

Brian was an efficient chairman, attending with equal care to matters of policy and details of administration. He brought new energy to the Civil Rights League, and his frequent letters and statements published in the Cape Town newspapers were a significant contribution to political debate. He was sensitive to the many strands of political thinking which have been current in the Western Cape and extremely acute in his evaluation of major issues. A discussion with him of any particular crisis always helped to clarify the situation.

Even-tempered and good humoured, he was always pleasant company — as Di has said 'He was a very quiet person'. However, he was angered by injustice, and driven to take action. He was also deeply concerned for individual victims of the apartheid system, and we remember in particular his efforts to help Siphiso Mtimkulu and his attempts to trace him after his mysterious disappearance. I remember too his anger at the injury and indignities to which the people of Cradock were subjected.



Di, Molly and Brian working together in the Eastern Cape

In his capacity as a businessman Brian also made a contribution to the task of shaping opinions and laying foundations for change. Through the Chamber of Commerce and the Association of Chambers of Commerce he frequently brought matters of political urgency to the attention of fellow businessmen. The Cape Town Chamber of Commerce is indebted to him for providing opportunities for formal and informal contact with members of black community organisations — important links which will surely not be broken.

During 1985 Brian had succeeded in arranging his business affairs so as to allow him increased time to devote to the struggle for basic human rights in South Africa, as well as to supporting Di in her work and to having more time for his family. His loss is therefore a particular tragedy for us and for them.

We have many reasons to be grateful for Brian's life, but most of all we have to thank him for giving us Di — for encouraging her, supporting her, and selflessly setting her free to give her time to Black Sash work.

And as the Black Sash work continues so Brian will live on in our memory.