

Interview with Amy Thornton

JF Mainly I'm interested in that question about the lesson of the '50s. I mean for someone who's got that perspective which is so few people do, I mean, are there other people actually in UDF who are active now who were active in COD?

A Not from COD. I mean there's people like Zollie Mlin di, and Oscar who were in ANC but I think I'm the only one left in Cape Town from COD.

JF And in Joberg, is it just Helen?

A There's Helen, and well, look, I think the Bardels think or consider themselves supporters of the UDF. People don't individually join the JDF, it's an affiliation of organisations and I don't know of they've joined any of the other organisations which are affiliated but, I think in CT I suppose I am.

JF So um, did any of the young people ask you about, did you ever give advice about things from various of your experience?

A Yes, um, ja...

JF Can you tell me any instances?

A I get very embarrassed about talking about myself like this but I ...what has happened I think, I think I'm reaching the age where apart from being an historical monument I'm becoming an elder, in that I find that sometimes in terms of people having disputes sometimes personality, sometimes ideological, that..on a few occasions I have been asked..wouldn't say mediate but sit in on a discussion to resolve (MM) disputes. And um, for example, UWA is having a meeting on Sunday afternoon - now I have not stood for re...I have been on the executive for two years, I have not stood this year - I don't want to be deeply involved on an organisational level, you know of meetings and so on.

They're having a meeting on Sunday - ah, it's an internal thing. There have been a lot of conflicts and criticisms and so on and so the executive is organising a meeting where people will really have an opportunity discuss. And Liz Abrahams who was once, and I have been asked to chair this meeting - why, because we're both old, we've

Interview : Amy Thornton

A both been involved in the '50s and they want us to introduce it by talking about comradeship and discipline and how people function and so on as a short sort of input and then chair a meeting which may possibly be quite acrimonious because Nan And I will be accepted as older people (as what?) As older people, I suppose who have been involved for some time. (You and who?) Oh sorry, Liz Abrahams - we call her Nana.

JF Aha. Let me just make sure - I want to get back to the white kind of thing. I mean the time that you were out with the kids and your illness etcit wasn't actually such a bad time to be out. I mean (it was sort of, there wasn't much happening) there wasn't much (Ja) How do you feel now? Do you feel like it's the Congress being lived all over again? The Congress movement of the old times or is there, are there differences?

A Well, first of all there weren't so many factions and organisations. That is first of all. Secondly, the big difference I see is that.. well, I think this is one issue I don't think the most important, you know I can't assess it - this kind of thing of democracy, I think quite often within the political organisations democracy has gone mad, because in the '50s we had an elec..election. We elected officials and committees and empowered them to act for a particular period. If at any time people thought they were acting incorrectly one called a special meeting and kick them out or else call up... when there was a conference a year later, assess what they had done and decide whether or not to re-elect them.

But here we had a situation where an executive was elected say for the Cape UDF but they couldn't..they were hamstrung for taking decisions because all the delegates to the council meeting to take the decision one by one, would be saying oh, we don't have a mandate and they'd have to take things back to the organisations and back to their committees and back to their branches because we have to get down to the grass roots democracy. So by the time things have gone back, back, back to grass roots and back, back, back to the General Council the issues were no longer urgent.

And I could never understand why they elected an executive and never allowed them to take a decision. And that to my mind, they've got this democracy thing and...it's around the twist, you know. It.. it's kind of...I don't know, what are the words - its just democracy

Interview : Amy Thornton

A gone mad. That to my mind, is not what democracy is - if you elect people surely you elect them because you trust them and you know that they're going to..they've got a mandate. There is a declaration, a policy; a conference decides on policy, they've got a mandate, if they don't act within the mandate you can call a conference and kick them out. But to make every decision, have to go back to the branches of 40 organisations before you can, you know, ok... you can go to the other extreme and bulldoze decisions through but I think that one really needs to find a happy medium which enables us to function quickly and respond and act in situations.

JF And would you say um, to get back to the question of similarities, the differences with the '50s. I mean does it seem to you that this is very much the '50s tradition with the you know..when UDF was launched did you think now this is...hooking back to COD and the Congress Movement?

A Ah, you know, that's an awkward question. Ok, when they...equating UDF and ANC I mean (ja) you know on such...But..I certainly, seeing all the people there was an exhilarating experience. I mean I, well I missed out on the Congress of Democrats and here I am at a really historic occasion (mumbled)yes, I ja; I don't know if you've seen the films of the UDF launch, and I mean it captures to some degree (ja) the tremendous feeling and there were people there who kind of crawled out of the woodwork who hadn't been seen for twenty years and it was an absolutely wonderful thing.

And the response of delegates and the meeting to anything to do with the Congress Alliance and the Freedom Charter you know..and the way people were talking about working class struggle, it was really tremendous. It was really something, very, very special; you know I really felt thrilled to be there.

JF Did you feel um, that as a white there was a place for you that might have been lacking in the BC eras and the lulls that...?

A I wasn't all...I wasn't very...ok, let me put it this way, I wasn't really strongly aware of the whole BC movement because I was away[?] and a lot of the time and I wasn't reading the literature and so on. I knew there was a Black Consciousness Movement and ah..what was your question again?

Interview : Amy Thornton

JF Did you feel that as a white person that being at the launch..I mean it was exciting for a lot of reasons but as a white was it exciting?

A Yes, it was exciting as a white, but I had always had this total conviction that um, there is a place for the whites; that ah, and the whites, I don't like to say the whites ^{living/?} leaders in S.A. it sounds patronising, I don't mean it that way but whites have been there for a long time and I mean they are not going to forget and I do believe there's the possibility for a non racial, real democracy in S.A. I never doubted the fact and I..I always used to say..speaking to other whites, who would say, like Dennis Goldberg was a fool, he stuck his neck out and look what happened to him, he's wasted his life. And I would say Dennis Goldberg is a reason that you have a claim to live in S.A. It's because of Goldberg that you'll be able to say there is a place for whites in S.A. because he's been willing to be in that position.

And I really do believe that we're not going to get rid of all the whites in S.A. and..but I think there are far stronger racial feelings than we often give credit for. There's a lot of hostility and anger, even among people who are ideologically who would not espouse as BC.

But it's been wonderful for example, to meet people like Tera Lecota, Popo Mulefi; people who were from the very sort of cradle of the BC Movement who'd spent sort of ten years on Robben Island&because of their contact with Nelson and Godelman Betjie and people like that - Growing through their black conscious to the acceptance of a non racial democracy.

And I went to the AZASO annual..which was once held in C.T. and these people had just come out of jail, just been..and I heard them speak for the first time and it was tremendous and then I met Tera again and Popo and all....because of UDF and they were so kind of free of racialism and it had really been something that they had really and truly worked through.

JF Did they know who you were?

A Ja...because I knew Nelson you see and Go?win and all that and apparently in jail as I say people relive experiences again and again.

JF So did they know who you were?

Interview : Amy Thornton

A I think they did - no, no I'm....(as..) I met Tera the first time I chaired the meeting he spoke ⁱⁿ Cape Town the first time, in Observa-
tory - there was a meeting.

JF Ok, can I use...can I ask you have you ever gotten any evidence whether it was him knowing who you were, some recognition, card or something that, after the period of BC, there were young blacks actually knew about and cared about the '50s and that period and knew the role of whites, ^{then} I mean you could come maybe in 1975 and ask a black in Soweto had he ever heard of Bram Fischer and he probably would have said no. And yet because of the resurgence of Congress traditions and stuff everyone (ja)you know. I mean do you have anything about that (ja) I mean I'm wondering if you've ever; like Jeremy has kind of arranged for me to see some black - Xhumbela (Malcom Xhumbela yes) who knew about Jeremy's trial (that's right)-interesting thing for him, some affirmation that blacks knew who he was and actually taken some kind of comfort from it at a certain time. Have you ever had any experience like that where you know, where you were out of it for a while and that it...?

A What has happened to me is that you know the...certainly in my time if you were...I suppose I was relatively well known say among Cape Town area amongst ANC people because of my position as Secretary, also because for years I had been involved in study classes and things like that. And they give people nick names and one day they came to me and they told me: do you know what your nickname is - your nickname is Nonnheba or something like, I can't pronounce it properly sort of like mother - I don't know...what. And I would...and it has happened to me on more than one occasion that I've been somewhere, particularly with Mildred ²-sear, you see- she speaks, she's African speaking, Xhosa and she'll grab hold of my arm and she'll say to the women, 'do you know who this is - this is Nongnheba' or someone and people will say oh, like they knew. I don't know.

Um, certainly I..it and of course there are African people whom I did not particularly remember where I'd spoken at meetings for Kom - ?
(180) given lectures and things like that. And like Malcom Kumbula for instance, I couldn't quite remember him; he'd come out of Robben Island and he came to the house here, there was some function or something and he grabbed hold of me and he you know, and I hadn't particularly remembered him. I remembered Zollie and Oscar and that and he

Interview : Amy Thornton

A turned to my child and said your mother was so thin, which always does my heart good to hear. And I'd obviously been at meetings with him and things that he had remembered more than I had. It's very heartwarming and so on.

JF Um, do you think that the..the question I'm asking everyone coz its so interesting to get different perspectives - do you think that this is a useful endeavour to try and look at the role of whites obviously within a framework, you know, not trying to say that they're any bigger...?

A Yes, I think it's very important. As I say, the white population is not going to disappear. A lot of racial feeling exists and I think that the fact that there are whites who have played, how do you know, minorer role - just means that it's not just a straight black-white issue and I think that's very important.

In the same way I always feel it's you know, in terms of the Nazis, I'm always telling my children, you know the number of people who died in the camps, 650 thousand, non Jewish Germans who had resisted and died in camps and I think that is important - you know, that all kinds of human resistance to tyranny is important. And I think in some ways it has been hard for whites, particularly in the '60s when the Congress was banned.

Those whites who remained to actually still stand out and in such isolation. And don't forget that the African comrades in that period also with..found themselves withdrawn from the struggle - there was nothing happening and they sort of - take Oscar for example, he opened a shop ... and you know got on with living until Food and Canning was ^{resur-}erected and bannings expired; he wasn't re-banned and came back in Food and Canning and then you know, was arrested etc.

It happened to a certain extent although for years I remember him well, for years he was out of things and with the UDF people have been coming back.

And people like Mountain Qumbela are different - they came out of jail in a period when there was activity again, straight back into activity. So was Tera Lac- and others. But there was a very, very ah..quite a prolonged period that there was almost no political activity and I think the history of all political movements will show this kind of ebb and flow of heavy activity and periods of practically nothing happeneng.

Interview : Amy Thomson

JF I'm interested in this which relates a bit to, to know, it's obviously to the issue being white, to tie..but I don't know if I can ask the question very well but I'm just wondering how in those years you bridged the cultural gap. I mean you felt you grew out of your white thing...

A Well, let me..look..it was a lonely period because if I was totally honest it was impossible to have friendships across the colour line during that period. Like they had the Group Areas Act, they introduced, the townships you know were out; people not being able to meet socially and nowhere to go socially. And I think if I am really honest I never made a kind of personal friend among the rank and file ANC members because there wasn't all that much in common.

I mean, I'm sure we had things in common politically and were comrades who worked together and so on. Um the people I got to know better and I don't know, does it sound snobbish; I knew Jusaf Dabe, I mean I'm lucky that I knew all that sort of era of people and they were the people one was associating with, they were the people at whose feet I sat. The, the very working class comrades that I can, because across, people that I worked with in study classes; I don't say I was the teacher and they the pupils and I had nothing to do with them, but there wasn't much social contact. Social contact among black students there was, and so on. And I think that I'm not ashamed of that because I think its an honest assessment of how things were.

It's different now, because first of all, the black urban population is so much more sophisticated and the..I mean another thing that interested me amongst the young people were the love relationships across the colour line that were opening and flourishing. There was nothing like that in my time. The Immorality Act was being rigidly applied, there was nowhere that you could go, there was nowhere that you could live. So that also kept people apart socially and that has changed, that has been a big change in this time.

JF MMM. Another thing is, there was such a period probably especially when you were more you know, not involved with things, when there especially among whites who were becoming, moving leftward, a real disdain and contempt for liberals and really for other whites. You know, I think some in a certain way about embodies that. I mean he's with the blacks and he doesn't have any quandries about things. Do you think its..there is a new emphasis on reaching out

Interview : Amy Thornton

JF to other whites? I mean could you just picture somebody like Graham Bloch, he goes on and on about the need for that and they're...do you feel that that's important and that's something new and different to the '50s? I mean did you attempt in the '50s to stick to your next door neighbour and try to tell them about the bridge? Freedom....?

A Yes. The COD tried to hold meetings that whites would attend. I remember we used to hire a room in the city Hall, the Robing Room or something, which could hold about 60 people and if 20 people turned up we thought that was quite a big deal. That's how small it was. Except when the..Luthuli came to C.T. and suddenly the whites wanted to hear this black man; it sort of took off like a prairie fire. And we had this huge meeting in the Drill Hall in C.T. and hundreds of whites came; it was predominantly blacks but it was the first time we had seen so many whites who wanted to hear Luthuli.

What there is today of course, are more and more whites who are deeply concerned about what is happening here and not just hear what the blacks have to say. UDF is the only forum through which they can hear. But there are many things besides UDF there's another..I mean another organisation like the End Conscription Committee and they held a meeting in the Clairmont town hall which I attended and I was..am..

Ivan Thomas spoke at this meeting. He was marv..first time I ever heard him, he was terrific. I mean his kind of sincerities-shines out absolutely beautiful and I was amazed. There was this audience - 85% white in a packed hall and to talk about conscription. I would say not even a year ago, if they had tried to call a public meeting about ending conscription there would have been a tiny audience and 85% of the people would have been hurling abuse at the speakers.

Times are definitely changing.

JF Are you going to change in that regard or do you feel that you..I mean I would think in some ways that you would've felt so badly treated by whites and having been so isolated and gone through all those bannings and so forth, I mean do you think that..do you ever try to talk to other whites, I mean are you convinced about that kind of work?

A Listen, I...can't say that I'm going to knock on doors and that but I talk to whites wherever I am. I actually quite like people even if they're white you know, and I've got quite strong feminist ideas but I don't hate men. I like men; I don't have feelings about categories

Interview : Amy Thornton

A about people, I really don't.

JF Do you go out with million signatures, do you try at dinner parties to talk to other whites? Have you ever converted some whites to UDF?

A I don't think I've converted but I do know that people are more willing to listen and a lot of people who used to be quite antagonistic to my ideas, now come and ask me questions about what I think is happening. I have not been a good organisational person like Gaby Schapiro who is fantastic. I mean really..she'll go and stand with placards and she'll knock on doors - she's marvellous. I mean she is a most exceptional person.

Well, I won't say I've done it all in my life and I'm not doing it now, I actually just don't feel like doing it. Which makes me not such a wonderful person.

JF I mean are you cynical about the scope for it?

A No, not at all, not at all. I don't have any cynicism about it. I have lots..as I say I get kind of get short tempered and angry about the factionalism..but I do not have cynicism about the work. And I wish I had..I think it involved a lot of sort of personal hassles - maybe I'm making excuses but I wish I had the energy to do what Gaby does but one thing I'll tell you something: I mean because I don't like high profile, to stand in the street with a placard is for me an agony - I can actually remember being quite glad that I was banned in 1959 because I had a real reason not to go and stand with a placard in the street. You know I wasn't sort of renaging my duty; I hate that kind of thing.

JF How old are your kids ?

A They range from almost 22 to the baby is 16.

JF Are they boys or girls?

A My eldest is a boy and I have three girls.

JF So does that conscription issue hit you personally?

Interview : Amy Thornton

A Well, my son went to school overseas when he was nearly 16 and he did schooling in Gurnsey in Channel Islands and then he came back here, but he wanted to do Hotel Management and so he went to London to do that and he qualified and he was then faced with a tremendous dilemma. Because there was no kind of future for him in Europe, his family was here and no jobs to be had there and so he came back here facing the possibility that he might be called up. Now I..my son is not particularly political, he certainly doesn't like apartheid, he really doesn't want to join the S.A. army and I was comforting myself with the thought that if he did have to go, you see I know, I mean, I couldn't expect my son, because I think that is a personal decision, to go to jail for 6 years with conscientious..you either, well he's not a conscientious objector although he loathes the system and doesn't want to fight for it - I think this is the case with quite a lot of young men and I don't think one can instruct people to go to jail for 6 years.

And I used to comfort myself with the thought that if he was called, well being sort of actually qualified in catering at this level that he's going to be used in the army in some line of catering for officers or something like that. Its unlikely he'll go into combat anywhere. Anyway, we were saved from the final kind of steps because he got a job at Sun City and call up papers arrived to me; he'd been given deferment each year and we sent these papers off to him and the Peronnel Manager at Sun City phoned the castle and said I have got a South African who has got call up papers, is somebody living in Bophutatswana liable; and there's one blessing to be had for our so called independent states. They are not liable, not in S.A. So he's working in Sun City. I don't know how long he will work there but I do feel at least whatever decision he makes is his decision- he's nearly 22 and if he comes to work in S.A. he will then be liable for a call up.

And I still feel, having had the experience of 5 star hotels and all this they will use him in that kind of capacity. You know it's something I comfort myself with - sure I would be, I won't say I'd be more proud of him, I would give him every support if he was a conscientious objector and..but I am..don't feel I'm in a position to talk for my son. You should go to jail or should do this or that. I think that's a personal decision he'll have to make. And I'm very glad its been postponed.

JF You said at one point your position in the Congress, you were Secretary. Were you Secretariat?

Interview : Amy Thornton

A The..when the Congress of the People..the campaign before its start -ed they formed a joint congress alliance, you know nationally and then regionally and in C.T. there was a joint congress Committee on which there sat representatives of the COD, the ANC and SACPO. And I was secretary of that committee.

JF Can you just..this is kind of summing up but can you kind of say in your, articulate in your words what you would see to be the role of whites and how you, do you feel it's changed over the years? Do you think there's a different kind of role, a more scope for role for whites now than in the '50s?

A Now look I think that, unless you're a sort of rabid conservative party person, if you're white, you're worried, you see the writing on the wall and are very anxious and I know that lots of young affluent whites are trying to make new starts in places like Canada, Australia and America but those who can afford it and have professions and expertise to export or lots of money. But the majority of whites are here and they are going to stay here and I believe they will adjust to the situation.

I mean I think of the kind of talk I used to hear about Zimbabwe from whites who used to come on holiday for some its been very ? but they have in fact adjusted to the situation and they're surviving. I really believe this will happen here as well.

JF Adapt or die.

A Ja, ja. And people do adapt and the more they adapt the more they're going to find it's not so terrible. I think that this is a beautiful rich, country with fantastic potential and why, sure I'd like to see a rural socialist democracy in S.A. I think even if we get rid of apartheid even in terms of capitalism, it will be such an unleashing of creative ability and you know, I believe in the slogan which they chant at meetings: Put the things from Mozambique: the "Aluta Continua" - the struggle continues. But I think there are victories to be gained along the way. Maybe, people say you know, you're old and the only thing is one great, ^{immediate} revolution, in the social millennium and I don't think that happens.....