

INTERVIEW WITH MISS ELA GANDHI

1. **TG:** FOR THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW PLEASE PROVIDE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS?

EG: Miss Ela Gandhi and I reside in Berea.

2. **TG:** WHERE DID YOU STUDY?

EG: University of Natal.

3. **TG:** WHAT DID YOU STUDY?

EG: B.A degree 1962, B.A [SOCIAL SCIENCE] 1968, B.A Honours Degree 1972.

4. **TG:** WHAT WAS IT LIKE GROWING UP IN THE APARTHEID ERA?

EG: It was extremely difficult. There were a lot of divisions of people. As a child, I used to like going to the Durban CBD, to the beachfront, to the library, to the shopping malls and even restaurants, but we as Indians were not allowed to go to certain areas, because they were reserved for white people. During the 60's and 70's there was a great urban influx of people from rural areas without a pass. People were emotionally weakened some were sacred, sad, frustrated. Some were oppressive and others just turned and ran away. During my teenage life, my family and I were living on the edge. I remember when I used to go to school; it used to take me half-an-hour to walk from my home to Duffs Road Station. Jump, off at Greyville Station and then walk to Durban Girls and the same cycle happened in the afternoon. When I completed matric, I pursued for tertiary institutions. The universities we attended were completely segregated. The university I attended was in Lance Road in an old warehouse. Lessons first began in Sastri College, but after a while the university bought a warehouse. We mostly had lectures in the afternoons because lecturers had to lecture white students in the morning. We were given second class treatment. The lecturers were not fully concentrated, some were tired and others were just not interested. Eventually I graduated in 1962, but our graduation ceremony was separate. The students of Natal University boycotted to hold a "MIXED" graduation ceremony and in 1970, it was achieved. Life was hard, bitter, frustrating and very discriminating. Sometimes it was fun and exciting; we lived on the edge, but the bottom line was that life was extremely difficult, tough and painful.

5. **TG:** WHAT IS YOUR PRESENT OCCUPATION?

EG: I am presently retired; however I give occasional lectures at UKZN, tertiary institutions, high schools locally and abroad.

6. **TG:** WHO INFLUENCED YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED IN POLITICS?

EG: My greatest mentors were my father and grandfather. When I was a child I used to read my grandfather's diary and there was a lot of information about different faiths and people; and how they lived. My grandfather also wrote about non-violence and the "OPPRESSOR OF EVIL". We should oppose the evil. We should not just accept apartheid...we should fight for our freedom, but we should do it in a passive way...not to inflict pain on people. In 1956 there was a "STAY

AWAY" a 3 day strike. During the strike people talked about apartheid and discrimination; about prejudice and how to fight the government. This event influenced me to become involved. When I was 10-12 years old there was a rally in Red Square [TODAY KNOWN AS NICHOLAS SQUARE]. We marched to Smith Street Post office; Indian, black and coloured people were asked to walk through the "WHITE ENTRANCE" of the post office and one of the people that walked through was my sister. They took her name down, but she was not arrested. When I understood what was happening, I wanted to help so that is how I became involved.

7. TG: PARENTS PLAY AN INSPIRATIONAL ROLE IN THEIR CHILDRENS LIVES, ESPECIALLY AT A YOUNG AGE. DID YOUR PARENTS PLAY AN INSTRUMENTAL PART IN YOUR CHILDHOOD AND DID THEY INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION TO GET INVOLVED IN POLITICS?

EG: My parents did not really fight the oppressor, but my sister was involved. My mum and dad encouraged her and we used to accompany her to mass meetings in the 1960's and 1970's.

8. TG: CAN YOU RECALL THE FIRST DAY YOU STARTED FIGHTING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS? HOW WAS IT AND WHAT WAS YOUR FEELINGS?

EG: I was about 13-14 years old and in high school. The Group Areas Act was being implemented and there was clamping down on people, African people. People were being removed from Duffs Road. There was an urgent meeting that was going to be held and I gave out the pamphlets. The first meeting that I held, was between 1978-1980. Before the meeting I and many other people were banned and I was arrested, so I could not address the meeting. Years later, there was a meeting held in Khali Street church. There was no loud speaker and I had to shout. There were a lot of people at this meeting and I was excited that people were aware of their rights and they wanted to do something about it.

9. WERE YOU EVER HOUSE ARRESTED OR IMPRISONED?

EG: Yes, I was house arrested and banned for eight and a half years. We had to hold underground meetings.

10. WERE WOMEN ADAMANT TO GET INVOLVED IN POLITICS AND WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK WOMEN WOULD HAVE PLAYED IN S.A POLITICS?

EG: Women had a very high spirit about politics. They were highly motivated and were very organized. African women were only interested in their ultimate survival and African women could not come to Durban areas. Women in Chatsworth, Phoenix and Merebank were angry in increased rentals and they could only use limited water. There were no separate readings, no control and people were furious! There were leaking pipes and Indian people were forced to pay for all the unused water. Women fought against the municipality, they were persistent and all the people were reimbursed. Women were mainly involved in demonstrations, sit-ins and marches. In one particular story, women from Phoenix marched to the Phoenix rent office. 200 brave women held a sit-in. The SA Army was called in, but these women were not afraid. This marked the ultimate bravery of women and that "IF YOU STRIKE A WOMEN, YOU STRIKE A ROCK".

11. TG: MOST POLITICALLY-DRIVEN WOMEN WERE NOT RECOGNISED. DO YOU THINK THAT THEY ARE HONOURED IN PRESENT SA?

EG: Firstly woman did participate and some held high profiles. Yes...some were left out, but very few participated in important negotiations. But women drew attention and they got 50/50 representation. Women were eventually nominated into power and the constitution gave women equal status.

12. TG: HOW CAN WE HONOUR THOSE WOMEN?

EG: Women are not respected by men because they have not cultivated respect for themselves. There are currently award ceremonies and accolades are being awarded to women. Youth need to respect women...to...honour and...hold women in high prestige. We need to show them love and that...we care.

13. TG: DO YOU THINK IT'S TIME FOR SA TO HAVE its FIRST WOMAN PRESIDENT AND WHAT DIFFERENCE DO YOU THINK A WOMAN COULD MAKE?

EG: S.A has reached that stage where a woman president is highly welcomed. It does not matter whether the president is a male/female, there should be no prejudice. However, it is important that whoever takes the role, should promote transformation in society. Transform the freedom of the country, fight for people's human rights...personally I think there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that our government is actually a democracy. The first step is to ensure that people in high positions do not abuse their power of status. In my view, the country needs a strong person. If it is a woman, I would be extremely jovial, but that woman should teach SA an important lesson. We need to respect the person. That person needs to be powerful and exert control. He/she needs to bring about a change in SA to ensure progress towards real liberation. The difference a woman could make would indicate that Africa is transforming. A female president could reform, change the status and create better opportunities for SA. They could be more safety regulations. There would be little or no oppression against women because SA would have a beacon of hope and a woman would lay the foundation of what needs to be achieved.

14. TG: WHAT MESSAGE DO YOU HAVE FOR THE CHILDREN OF SA?

EG: Never forget where you come from, where you are headed....never forget your rights and never forget the Freedom Charter. Children need to study this Charter and take the document seriously. Look at each point and evaluate it. Formulate a goal to help SA achieve her independence. Do not forget your culture of your country. Make resources available to the people of your country. And the greatest lesson that I can teach you is to practice the principle of non-violence and remember **TO LIVE SIMPLE BUT THINK HIGH.**