

Helen Suzman must be honoured as a moral signpost on SA's path to democracy

By RAENETTE TALJAARD

As I write this tribute to a remarkable woman, whom I loved dearly, a cartoon-print of her by legendary New York Review of Books cartoonist David Levine is staring at me sensing the sadness about her passing away.

I obtained it as a gift for Helen's 90th birthday and she – in characteristically honest and forthright style – summarily dismissed it as hideous and roundly declared how much she preferred Zapiro's iconic images of her, while thanking me for the thought and noble intentions.

Helen always knew what she liked and disliked, in the same way that were no ambiguities or shades of grey for her between right and wrong.

Equally, when her academic research led her deeper into the injustices of labour migration in our country she had no ambivalence or hesitation that she had a role to play in a complex society



REMARKABLE: Helen Suzman

marred by injustice, that she would be its "cricket in a thorn tree" who would speak truth to power with clear moral purpose in Parliament in a country that had lost its moral compass.

As she often said: "I had a wonderful opportunity to use the parliamentary stage to bring the world's attention to what was going on." And Helen became our country's Lioness of Parliament – a legendary activist who was always present in communities, seeing for herself, and a meticulous researcher who exposed every bizarre nuance of the social engineering that was apartheid for the world to see.

When I first met her in the early '90s, while still a parliamentary researcher for the then Democratic Party, it was her sincere interest in the people she met, irrespective of rank or standing, that struck me most, given her own stature.

It was her clear understanding that only a fundamental improvement in the living conditions of all South Africans would herald real freedom that remained alive to her as she continued to travel to Soweto and Alexandra, tracing progress and change.

One of my last long conversa-

tions with her revolved around how distressed she was at how little change has really come to communities that often were in the same conditions that she recalled from her earliest visits and how we all shared a duty to understand that our very stability as a society was dependent on this lynchpin – change and dignity as core ingredients of freedom.

For Helen, it was an immediate human connection and a focus on human dignity that transcended every other aspect of politics – a quality that served her well as she reached into the hearts and minds of not only her Houghton constituency, but all South Africans who recognised her contribution to bringing change to our country. Those who understood that she did what she could with what she had at her disposal: Parliament.

I met Helen late in her life, but she remained actively engaged in South African public life in various bodies and institutions and always had the details of contemporary and

contentious issues at her finger-tips.

She remained actively engaged and seized with every aspect of our political dramas and intrigues from Polokwane to the recall of President Mbeki and the formation of Cope and, as her daughter Frances has reminded us all, will be sad to have missed the 2009 elections, even though she longed for personal peace and freedom from the human frailties that come with age.

It was a rare honour and privilege as a young parliamentarian in the late 1990s to have the opportunity to speak to Helen Suzman for advice about public life and the sometimes nasty realities of practical politics. Reflecting back on how difficult it must have been for her as a sole female representative in Parliament for so many years made the path always seem much less challenging and daunting.

It is impossible to sum up the life of Helen Suzman neatly as it crosses different periods in our country's path to freedom and democratic gov-

ernance, a path on which she stands as a signpost: a reminder of what a single individual can contribute to change.

Helen will be remembered for her courage, fortitude, magnanimity and humility – most recently evidenced by her declining the prospect of the renaming of Houghton Drive in her honour. We will honour her for her unwavering commitment to accountable governance. For Helen this was not an academic discourse about designing the best system for its "elegance" but for government to be as close to the people as possible in order to hear their voices directly.

Helen's sparkling sense of humour, which was only ever rivalled by the sparkle in her eyes, will be keenly missed by those who were privileged to have her as a friend and mentor. It was a sparkle the Nationalist rulers found could be matched by a steely gaze that always confronted them across the aisle on matters of morality and principle in pursuit of the truth: that oppression

in South Africa was a crime so vile that it had to be eradicated.

I can already imagine Helen rolling her eyes at the mere thought that this article had been written at all, and for all the fuss about her passing, both locally and abroad. But Helen deserves to be celebrated, remembered and emulated in meaningful ways that model her clear moral purpose.

A great South African has left us behind, but we must keep a clear vision of her values as we steer our course and continue to build on what she and so many others sacrificed for – a vibrant, multi-racial democracy that the world could take note of for its peaceful transition and message of hope. We must honour Helen by realising her hope for change and dignity to touch the lives of all who live in this beautiful country she loved so passionately.

● This article first appeared on the website: www.hs.org.za. Taljaard is the director of the Helen Suzman Foundation

Township schools need all our support

In the wake of the matric results, city principal Rajan Naidoo appeals for help to turn struggling schools into world-class institutions

The announcement of the recent matric results and the associated analysis and commitments to the future by the respective authorities within the education sector are exactly as they have been for the past five to 10 years. Yet the trend of affluent schools achieving highly and township schools lagging way behind continues.

As a principal in a township school I would like to give some constructive input and I sincerely hope the respective authorities take it as such.

I would also like to use this opportunity to make an appeal to the corporate world to consider assisting schools such as ours.

The input I hope to make is based on my personal experiences but would probably apply to township schools in general.

I am the principal of Masibambane Secondary School in Bloekombos in Kraaifontein. We have had our sixth set of matriculants this past year and over the years we have worked hard to establish our school as one of the leading township schools, with results consistently at 80% and above.

In fact, in 2007 we attained an 84% pass and in 2008 an 83% pass with a 74% pass in mathematics and 95% pass in mathematics literacy.

We achieved this against all odds as we lack basic infrastructure such as staff toilets, a staff rest room and science laboratories.

There are 1 250 learners in the school with an average pupil-teacher ratio of 1 to 50.

Our achievements are due mostly to the dedication and hard work of educators and learners and the support of an NGO, namely ASSET (Association for Educational Transformation) which assists us with Saturday classes, winter school and spring school.

The support from the education department is minimal and the reasons I say this are as follows:

1. On numerous occasions the school governing body of our school sent e-mails to the MEC's office requesting a meeting but it was to no avail because, besides acknowledging receipt for the first e-mail, there was nothing forthcoming thereafter.

The intention was to brief the MEC on an agreement we had with the previous MEC on the completion of our school buildings and while some progress has been made thus far with personnel from physical planning, a commitment is still lacking for the final completion of the school. Clearly the political instability within the provincial government has to a certain extent impacted on service delivery.

2. ASSET offers our learners tuition in five learning areas and we struggle to cover the costs incurred in offering the remaining subjects.

On approaching the district office we were told there was simply nothing the district office could do to



INPUT NEEDED: The principal of Masibambane Secondary School, Rajan Naidoo, believes education authorities should consider holding an indaba in the various townships to discuss an integrated approach to addressing the multi-faceted challenges learners face
Picture: ENRICO JACOBS

help as there were no funds available. The district office explained that since the schools within the Education District North did not fall within an urban renewable zone then the district received very limited funding and hence we were not eligible for extra funding.

While I acknowledge that schools within the urban renewable zones and the schools that have performed poorly need extra support, I also maintain that the schools in all townships and the schools that have consistently performed well be given extra support to sustain the good achievement and take the achieve-

ments to even greater heights.

Failure to do this and merely focusing on schools attaining a pass of 60% or more will simply perpetuate a culture of mediocrity among our learners in township schools.

Many, if not most, of the learners attending the more affluent schools have the benefit of well-resourced schools, small classes and parents who pay for private tuition, especially in subjects such as mathematics and science.

On the other hand our learners' parents are usually in the lowest-paid jobs and cannot afford to pay for such private tuition. The least

we could do for our learners is to make our schools available for evening study and arrange for extra tuition but this is a major challenge due to the lack of financial capacity.

The finances are required for light catering, a transport stipend for educators and the production of print material.

So long as the department of education continues with the superficial support it presently gives the township schools there will continue to be skewed results in favour of learners at the more affluent schools.

The education authorities should

consider holding an indaba in the various townships involving educators, social welfare authorities, the department of sport and culture, the department of community safety, the police and even the municipality, where task teams could be formed so that an integrated approach may be used to address the challenges facing learners in the townships.

The poor results of schools in the black townships are a manifestation of the poor conditions within which our learners live.

A simple yet crucial exercise would be for the municipality to improve its refuse-removal services

and clear the small dump sites scattered all over these townships.

This would improve health conditions within the community, give the learners greater pride in their communities and instil in them a greater sense of self worth, which would motivate them to seek self-development.

Finally, I implore the government to make a concerted effort to improve the lives of our learners and thereby remove the mental barriers that have been built over time.

● Rajan Naidoo has been the principal of Masibambane Secondary School for six years.

A new year means a new beginning and I have decided to start the year by upgrading my wardrobe.

In my case this is not a big deal. I'll still be wearing the same old baggy jeans and wine-stained shirts, but it really is time some of my socks and underpants were pensioned off. Most of them consist of more hole than fabric.

So I have been cruising the clothing stores and have noticed an interesting phenomenon.

Socks and underpants are quite expensive if you buy them singly, but you can save a lot by buying them in packs of five or six. When you do this you save about the price of one pair per pack.

But take a careful look at the contents of that six-pack. It will always contain five very normal briefs – or socks – and one outrageous one, probably decorated with pink flowers, teddy bears or green polka dots.

My mother always told me it was important to wear good underwear because "imagine the embarrassment if you were suddenly to land up in hospital and they found you were wearing torn or dirty underwear!"

Oh the horror!
(It was the same maternal logic that told me to finish my broccoli because "remember the starving children in Russia". I wasted years of my childhood exploring ways of sending broccoli to Russia.)

Well, some of those merry patterned underpants and socks are exactly the sort you would not want to be found dead in, let alone in hos-



DAVID BIGGS Tavern of the Seas

pital. Or even starving in Russia.

I sometimes wonder how those garish garments got to be on the shelves in the first place. Was it some sort of minor "arms deal"? ("If you buy 100 pairs of these floral underpants I'll give you a special deal on your daughter's wedding dress.")

However it happens, the shops find themselves having to dispose of hundreds of pairs of comical items nobody in their right mind would want.

So they offer them as a bribe. "You buy five pairs of normal underpants and we'll throw in – free of charge – a cheerful pair of briefs we couldn't sell anyway."

And they're not entirely worthless after all.
If you cut off the elastic waistband they make pretty good car polishing cloths.

Even then they can be embarrassing. I recently left a pair of these unspeakable underpants in the basket of the scooter, after using it as a polishing rag.

I stopped at a traffic light in Lavender Hill and was surrounded by a gaggle of small boys enquiring about the possibility of a donation.

Then one of them looked into my basket and shrieked with delight. "Hey, come and look here," he yelled to his pals in true Cape Flats Afrikaans.

"This oomie carries a spare pair of 'omnies' (onderbroek) in his basket."

I think I made their day.

Last Laugh

When asked for her occupation, a woman charged with a traffic violation said she was a schoolteacher.

The magistrate rose from the bench. "Madam," he said, "I have waited years for a schoolteacher to appear before this court."

He smiled with grim delight and said: "Now you sit down at that table and write: 'I will not pass through a red traffic light' 500 times."

The Wanderer

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Grow up, yummy mummies and faddy daddies

In Woolies, a mother leans forward into her trolley and asks her daughter what they should have for supper. "Sushi!" the girl shrieks, clapping her hands together.
"That's a good idea," the woman replies. "And what do you want for lunch tomorrow?" Then follows a string of gabbled words – probably something to do with the fact that the girl couldn't have been older than four. Or that she knows the French names for macaroni cheese and cocktail burgers.

Two days later, I read about a new trend in Britain where baby showers have become mini fashion shows as mums parade their little Chloes and Scarletts around in Prada shoes and Gucci rompers.

Heaven forbid if you bestow on the new sprog a sensible collection of booties and Babygros. Or mention such archaic practices as breastfeeding and natural birthing.

"What! Actually push a baby out of your whatchermacallit? You must be kidding, right! It would wreak havoc on my Brazilian!"

You would then be banished to the lounge with Puccini the Pug, while the leather-chested baby blinglers meow over wine spritzers on the veranda, their little treasures tottering on heels.

Has the world gone mad? Since when are four-year-olds consulted about dinner? Since now. Up the



HELEN WALNE Human League

road. At Woolies.

At the risk of sounding like a Monty Python skit, when I were a young 'un, we didna even have a telly. Nay. We didna have shoes nor Nintendos nor Diesel. Instead, we wore them hand-me-downs and had chameleon as friends. We ate mince not maki, and the most exotic thing on the menu was beef olives. We had to ask my mother if we could have an apple. And for Christmas, we got new school shoes.

Nowadays, kids wear clothes that cost more than my annual budget for e-buds. At the age of two, the little angels probably know more about 200-thread Egyptian cotton than I do, and are probably au fait with organic eel sushi and quinoa roulade. They've also eaten the aver-

age amount of food most South African kids will eat in a lifetime.

Yes, you want the best for your kids. But surely turning them into submissive consumers by the time they can pronounce *pain au chocolat* is doing them – and society – a disservice? Sure, the advertising satans will rub their horny hands in glee at the thought of a primed generation of lobotomised leeches, but what about independent thought? Creative expression? The possibility that we will end up with a world full of well-dressed sheep who will spend decades in therapy untangling the narcissism imposed on them by their parents? A future devoid of Edisons and Einsteins, because the sheep are more intent on baa-ing in BMWs than brainstorming?

We could blame Katie and Nicole. They're easy targets, parading as they do with their little Suris and Sunday Roses, all dicked up in designer dolly wear, inspiring your average moron to think, "Hey! If I dressed my little Gary in Gap Kids, he too could look important."

But it's not about the current or past Mrs Cruise – it's about the pathetic inability of 40K-a-week parents to cruise their own internal gaps and discover that swaddling kids in celeb threads is about their own insecurities.
Nothing makes me happier than meeting a child with an unfettered

sense of self. I recently spent a day with two little girls who wore *Little House on the Prairie* dresses while they did a hip hop routine and played the piano. One of them shrieked with glee as she fashioned an old pair of pyjamas into a Robinsson Crusoe ensemble. They would not know a Prada from a Pep, and they are the most content, free people I have ever met.

But there is hope. With the credit crunch in full goosetep, yummy mummies and faddy daddies might have to start becoming adults, tightening their Dior belts and exercising some control over how much raw fish they can afford. Alternatively, the anxieties attached to cutting back on manicures/golf carts/juicing systems/messages might send them into Xanax overdrive, resulting in chilled-out zombies who no longer feel the need to cling to some sort of social standing. Or reality.

And that's when I come in. Squeezing between their trolleys as they drift through the deli aisle in a pharmaceutical fog, I will ask in my best Fran Drescher voice: "Mummy, can I have 10 boxes of that organic cereal, two litres of milk, 15 punnets of cherries and some camembert?"

"Anything for you, my baby," they will murmur. "Anything. And you do look so cute in those enormous sandals."

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