

Lesley Grobler Constitutional Court Oral History Project

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This is an interview with Lesley Grobler and its Wednesday, the 14th of December 2011. Lesley, thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the Constitutional Court Oral History Project. We really appreciate your time.

No problem. It's a pleasure.

| wondered whether you could talk about early childhood memories in terms of where you were born, your family background and also events that may have led you to pursue a particular career pathway?

| was born in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo where | went to school, primary school and... shortly after my parents were transferred to Gweru, so we moved to Gweru and | finished my primary school there and then went to high school. | have two older brothers and with everything going on in Zimbabwe at the time. | couldn't finish my schooling there so my parents sent me to South Africa. | stayed with some friends here in Midrand and | went to Sandown High and about a year later, they came to South Africa and | moved back in with them. | finished Matric here at Sandown High. My one brother who is a cricketer came to school with me even though he'd done his Matric in Zimbabwe; just to play cricket and eventually he made the South African cricket team.

Oh, really!

It was quite exciting having like this celebrity brother, at one stage. What is his name?

His name is Steve Elworthy And from there, after Matric, | did a secretarial course at Wits Technikon, which was for one year and then | decided to go and see what it was like to work in the big wide world. So, | started off temping at Kelly Personnel, the Kelmack Group and they eventually appointed me permanently and one of the positions that actually came into the Kelly Group was a secretarial job at the Development Bank of South Africa. So, | applied for the job and | was successful. | worked there for ten years. | was very happy, | transferred within departments so | gained a lot of experience in Human Resources and Project Management and so on. And | decided then in about, | think it was 94 to resign from the Bank and | took all the pension | managed to get and | decided to travel overseas for a year, which | did, which was fantastic. | went all over Europe and England, Greece. | came back and went back at the Development Bank, temping and while | was temping for a

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gentleman there, a lady called me and said that Advocate Moseneke was looking for a PA and am I available. So, I said yes, actually, I am looking for a permanent job myself. So, I went for an interview, which happened to be a public holiday, with Judge (Dikgang) Moseneke, who was an advocate at the time. And he was working in business. So, I went for the interview and he offered me the job. And I started on the Monday and I have been with him ever since (laughs).

Gosh, from 1994?

Well, it was actually, I went overseas in 1995 so it was beginning of 2006. I actually started working for him and we were in business. He was the Chairman of Telkom at the time and he was also the Deputy Chairperson of New Africa Investments, which was the position that I was working for him. So, he tended to work with us three days a week and he worked at Telkom two days because he had his own PA (Personal Assistant) there. So, we worked very closely together.

I wondered given that social change had happened in South Africa; was this a new experience for you working for someone who was other than white? Or had that been something you had become used to earlier?

I was used to it earlier. At the Development Bank, I worked for a black lady, a very nice black lady and the person I was working at the time when the telephone call came to me was a black gentleman, so it wasn't anything new to me at all. You know working at the Bank and being exposed to all different race groups, it was definitely to my advantage to communicate and work with people like that and so it wasn't anything unusual for me.

And your initial experience working with Advocate Moseneke at the time, he was an advocate; what was your experience? What was he like to work with at the time? What were the things that you had to negotiate?

At the time, Advocate Moseneke was extremely busy and that's all I remember. There was you know from one meeting to the next, you had to be one step ahead of him all the time because one minute he would be in an office and the next minute he would be like on the other side of Johannesburg. So, you had to make sure that everything was planned well ahead. And what I learned fairly quickly after working for me, pay attention to detail and read the fine print and that to this day, I still do and to this day, the judge still says to me, you know, you definitely pay attention to detail, which is very important. So, it was completely different from what it was here because he was running around, he was going to meetings, he was out at Board meetings, he was a Director of numerous companies and Chairperson of also quite a few big corporations, like Metropolitan Life and African Merchant Bank. So you just

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had to be on the ball to make sure that you had your diary you set for the whole year, with all the Board meetings. | remember on many occasions, when the Judge was running late for a flight, | would have to make a connection, and check him in prior to him getting to the airport, so that was very challenging, it was very exciting.

So | presume that when he was appointed to the Constitutional Court you came along. Is that how it worked?

No, what actually happened, at the time, | was going through some personal things at the time and | said to the judge, | am just going to have a short break and | just went and did some temping work. And while | was doing that, Judge Moseneke was then appointed here to the Constitutional Court and subsequently was appointed the Deputy Chief Justice and he had another secretary here at the time. And what actually happened was his secretary at the time was expecting twins and while she was going on maternity leave, he phoned me and said would | like to come and work on a six month contract, considering that weâ\200\231d been working together so long, which | did because it seemed the company | was at, my temping was coming to an end anyway. So, | did and | came and | worked here.

When he approached you to come and join him at the Court, had you known about the Constitutional Court? Had you had an idea of what it would entail?

No, absolutely nothing. | was here for a couple of days but with the person that was in the job at the time, who briefly just told me the ins and outs, you know, the procedures. Other than that, absolutely no idea, what was lying ahead of me. So, . It was quite, quite nerve-wracking coming in. | remember the first day | started, they at the Constitutional Court, they had their Christmas party, it was always a nice way to like ease into it. But | was very scared in a sense, you know, you have all the judges and the Chief Justice and you donâ\200\231t really know how to greet them because, you know, you donâ\200\231t really know that. | was quite nervous, | must be honest.

When you arrived, | think Pius Langa had become Chief Justice...

Thatâ\200\231s correct.

...and in terms of actually easing yourself into a legal environment in the sense that you had worked in the business world...

Yes.

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| wondered whether you could talk a bit about what were some of the challenges for you and perhaps the positive things as well?

The challenges were mainly sort of getting used to the procedures with regard to all the cases, which came in. | did ask a lot of questions from the Senior Court Registrar. Because everything was foreign to me; | didnâ\200\231t know what directions were. | didnâ\200\231t know what court orders were. So, it was just a matter of actually learning by default. So, that was quite a challenge because obviously, | like to get things right and | am somewhat a bit of a perfectionist, so | like to get everything together, so that there was no orientation for me sort of to ease into the job like that. Sometimes, | think it is better to be thrown into the deep end and then you learn to swim very quickly. The other things were, the people around me were also willing to assist and just advise me on, how you make a travel booking and what are the correct procedures. So, in that way, the most positive thing was the people actually made it a lot easier for me. So, even like the ladies who clean the teacups, you get to know them and so in that way, of course, it was very nice.

| wondered in terms of the people that you worked with, were there specific individuals who really supported you specifically in the initial stages of easing into your job?

| think Mrs. Stander definitely was one person. | find her, | still find her very approachable. And she was always coming to check are you okay? Do you need any help with anything or advice? | think sheâ\200\231s one person that really stood out for me at the time because she was so available to assist me just with the procedures and that sort of thing.

| also wondered you have worked here for such a long time now, in terms of working with Justice Moseneke, now he is Depute Chief Justice, | wondered if you could talk about your relationship in terms of the working environment and some of the things you find very interesting or perhaps even challenging?

| think after working with somebody for so long, its currently going on to about fifteen or sixteen years now, | think you definitely get to know the person as a person, Not necessarily as a boss but in the sense, | can always tell if he comes in when | must leave him for five minutes, he can just ease into his work and...our working relationship is very good. As | say in the all time | have worked for him, its definitely about communication and we communicate one hundred percent. We also have complete respect for each other, thatâ\200\231s very important. Itâ\200\231s not really a challenge now because | think we have such good relationship together. There are certain things that happened over the years, which | find quite amusing or challenging but yes, itâ\200\231s definitely about communication with us.

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| wondered whether you could share, if possible, any amusing or challenging incidents?

Just sort of thinking of the top of my head... there are just little incidents, which happened. There was one occasion where we were still in business and Judge Moseneke used to wear contact lenses and we asked somebody who can go to the chemist and get ACUVUE contact lenses and he came back with one and Judge Moseneke looked and he burst out laughing. And you know, as | am saying it's a long time ago, | realised he actually has a really good sense of humour. And he said it's great, you bought me one but | have got two eyes, so it's just like little things. And he has a very good sense of humour and when the work is on, he is one hundred percent focused.

When you say that, do you find that he is very efficient and you enjoy working with him because you are very efficient; how does that relationship work?

Yes, he likes getting things done straight away, in which | am very similar. | think he's actually taught me to be like that. Why put off something tomorrow when you can do it now. And he's highly focused when it comes to his work and doing judgements. He won't settle if he's got a judgement to do, he won't settle until it's done and he reads it two thousand times to make sure it's one hundred percent perfect down to the full stop. So, | think, when he is in that focused mood, that's it, you just make sure you are available to type, just to assist him, He is an absolute perfectionist.

Interesting. Lesley, | wondered in terms of your chambers; how would you describe your chambers, what is the relationship with the law clerks and the Deputy Chief Justice and what is the general atmosphere?

| think the atmosphere is one, of work hard but also it's a very calm chamber. It is actually a very quiet chamber. The law clerks who have been coming and going through all the years, are so happy to be there and they learn so much from Judge Moseneke. He simply spends time with them and advises them and to make them into good lawyers which they will be one day. But | must say, the chambers are very calm; it is quiet and it's highly efficient. It has to be and | think it comes from the top.

| wondered in terms of transformation, you are one of the few white PAs and | wondered whether that in some ways is a challenge for you to be in the environment or do you find that people mix well? What is your general experience?

| think my general experience even when | was appointed in 1996, working with Judge Moseneke in business, the company | worked for, had had quite a

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few black or Indian PAs. | was probably one of two (white) PAs and | didnâ\200\231t feel uncomfortable, | went there and | think my experience at the Development Bank also helped me a lot because we were all different race groups there. | didnâ\200\231t really think it was a challenge, people came and they said to me oh we didnâ\200\231t expect you to last so long, that kind of thing and | think, it just shows, you treat people well, they treat well back and | think thatâ\200\231s what | have always done. You know it is not who you work for, itâ\200\231s about being civil and courteous and greeting people with respect. | think it's all about being civil and courteous, and | must be honest when | started at the Constitutional Court, it was the furthest thing from my mind. That was one of the least of my worries.

| also wondered Lesley, in terms of politics of the country, at some point in the mid 2000s there was a sense that perhaps Justice Moseneke would become Chief Justice. Do you think that the fact that he hasnâ\200\231t has in any way affected the morale for you and others?

| donâ\200\231t think so, you know. Maybe at the time, everything like that happened we were obviously somewhat disappointed for Deputy Chief Justice Moseneke but we also...and when | say we | am talking about the law clerks at the time, it was still a very calm chamber and probably even quieter than it is even normally. But most of us then at the time, thought things happen for a reason and we just felt that this obviously happened for a reason and we donâ\200\231t obviously know what that reason is but you canâ\200\231t bear grudges and you canâ\200\231t hold it against anybody. So at the time, yes we were disappointed but life carries on and everything actually continued exactly the same, so there was no change really for us.

| also wondered in terms of having worked at the Constitutional Court for a very long time, how would you rate it in terms of experience and is this something that you feel that you will continue to do or would you like to do something else with your life at some point?

| love the Constitutional Court. | really do. | am very proud to work here. Besides that | find my work very, very exciting and also very challenging at times and obviously working with Justice Moseneke is also a big factor. | donâ\200\231t know...I can honestly say | donâ\200\231t want to work anywhere else, so if | continue at the Constitutional Court till | retire then | would be happy with that, definitely.

Lesley, | have asked you a range of questions; is there something | have neglected to ask you that you would like to include in your oral history?

No, | donâ\200\231t think so. | think we have covered probably most of it. Thank you so much.

Int Thank you so much Lesley as well.

LG Pleasure.

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