

Esmé Wardle

LRC Oral History Project

21st July 2008

Int This is an interview with Esmé Wardle from the Legal Resources Centre in the Johannesburg office and it's Monday the 21st of July (2008). Esmé, on behalf of SALS Foundation thank you very much for agreeing to be part of the LRC Oral History Project. I should also say that I don't work for the Legal Resources Centre. I wondered whether we could start the interview if you could talk about your early childhood memories, what was that like for you growing up in South Africa under apartheid, where did you grow up, where did your sense of social justice and injustice develop?

EW Ok, I grew up in the coloured community of Noordgesig. You probably heard that Cecilie (Palmer), Vesta (Smith), people like that, has all grown up in that part, but you know where it originates from, where it was just Sophiatown and then people were then put into...

Int I wonder whether you could tell me about it?

EW Look, I don't know much about it because at that time I was still a child. Ok. But as we grew up we actually now know how we ended up in that part of Noordgesig.

Int How did you end up there...?

EW People were scattered, like from my grandmother, they all lived in Sophiatown area, and I think that's the time when they took over that area and made it into, I think, a white area, or whatever, and they took all these people...

Int So it was forced removals?

EW Ja, it was like forced removals. People were then moved to different places like to Noordgesig, I think, to Westbury and all that. And they started developing these small coloured communities, Eldorado Park and places like that.

Int So when the forced removals happened in Sophiatown, how old were you?

EW Ooh, that time I think I was (laughs)...I must have been very, very little...tiny. I must have been a child...

Int Did you remember...?

EW I actually opened...basically when I started having a sense I was actually in Noordgesig, not in Sophiatown. It just came from the...you know, from obviously my

grandmother and my mother that that's where we actually lived and then ended up in Noordgesig, ja.

Int Ok. You said that you only started having a sense of this had happened when you were in Noordgesig. Could you talk a bit about how you got that sense?

EW Look, my family background, all our...well, most of them are politicians, were politicians...you know, Vesta Smith...actually my name, actually came from my aunt, which is Vesta's younger sister, which is my grandmother, Mercie Palmer...it's her younger sister. The day when she had to sort of get out of this country, out of South Africa...

Int Really!

EW Yes.

Int What happened?

EW And...well, she was also involved in the struggle like Vesta Smith and very much involved. And she had to actually flee out of the country on that day when I was born, that's why I've got her name, Esmé.

Int So how are you related to Vesta...?

EW My mother's mother, which is my grandmother, and Vesta (Smith), are sisters.

Int Really! So you and Cecilie (Palmer) are related?

EW We are related, ja. Her mother Vesta (Smith), and my grandmother, are sisters. My grandmother was the elder sister. Vesta (Smith) was the younger sister.

Int Interesting ...

EW Basically that, and ja, I remember there was a time when while we were still in Noordgesig, there was a time that we...we just used to hear my mother saying, oh god, here's the Special Branch again. When all these things happened then we as children also we had to be kept in the house and they'd come and they'd check on where we go and where...you know, the elder people go and things like that. So I remember about that as my childhood, you know, sort of very, very vaguely. Obviously I was still very little, I was like, ja, probably ten, eleven years old.

Int Were you ever scared?

EW Look, at that time it wasn't so...not really scared because, you know, I didn't know what a police does and what the Special Branch, you know, at the age of eight, nine, like now. Today's children know exactly. There was no telly that time, so you don't see any of these things on television.

Int The other thing I wanted to ask you, why do you think...it seems to me having interviewed Cecilie (Palmer) and having interviewed Vesta (Smith) that you come from a family of very strong women.

EW Sort of, ja, I would say so, I would say so, ja, ja. It's just that, you know, ok, on Vesta (Smith)'s side she was like very...ja...that she was a very strong woman I must say, and she took her chances and she actually got a lot of, I think, bursaries and stuff, to be able to educate herself to a very, very high level. Whereas the others, obviously, at that time it was a bit hard to get that type of thing. Ja, but I would say...I mean, even now, her sister also she's...and her children...John Matikiza I don't know if you know him? He's now some big guy at the newspaper, Mail & Guardian or something. Ja. He's actually...that's our cousin as well, and he's...

Int So he's related to Vesta Smith and you?

EW That's the youngest sister, Esmé's son. Quite interesting family...

Int Yes, quite an interesting family background. But why do you think your family, Vesta (Smith), your mom, and all of them, why do you think they were political?

EW I think it actually started all off from the...because my...their mother, my great grandmother, was...had come from a, almost, I think, whitish background. And she married a black man. And I think it all started there. And already there, there was a bit of a tension with race, I think from her people. And I think it's also part of that that started...you know, and then I think, ja, they...ja, they never liked that type of thing because of the coloured thing. And I think that's why I got involved...

Int Did they ever talk about your great grandmother?

EW Well I know her.

Int You do?

EW I know her, she died when my first son was born. And I remember she used to call him...his name was Ricardo, and she used to call him Vivaldo or something (laughter). Ja, that was 1979 he was born. So...and then she just died after that. No, I know her, I was then what, twenty years old...

Int Also Esmé, I also wondered, you were growing up in this family, what were some of the stories? Did people use the house as a safe house, or Vesta (Smith)'s house as a safe house? Did you know that there were activists coming through?

EW Look, not really as children, you know, I mean, those years it's not like today's children that knows everything. Those years, you know, children are children, and children used to remain kids and you must be seen and not be heard, or something like that, or the other way around, and there wasn't a matter of children must know everything like now. So we weren't much involved, we didn't know much, they would hide away from the children as much as possible, not to scare the children and things like that. So no, we're not really, you know...there wasn't much of that type of relationship. Or that we would know too much. Because obviously for the children to know too much it's not good as well at that time because kids can just talk, you know, I mean...you can go to school and these people stop you in the street and they start questioning you and you start blabbing out, which obviously can make a lot of trouble.

Int Ok. So you went to school and you were in a predominantly coloured area?

EW Ja.

Int Ok. And what was school experiences....was there political activism, did you become involved, did you stay out of it?

EW No, I was actually a bit very scared as...look, we moved out of Noordgesig when I was about thirteen, and I moved to Riverlea, it's also a coloured area. There wasn't much of activists and stuff like that at school, so there wasn't very much of those types of activity going on. So I never really bothered to get involved in those type of things.

Int So you finished school, what happened?

EW I went to teacher's school, to become a teacher, and unfortunately I fell pregnant in my second year, and those years if you fall pregnant you cannot continue. You're not allowed to. As things happened, you know, and...I actually still would have loved to be a teacher, if I had the opportunity.

Int You'd have made a great teacher...

EW But things happened so fast, I actually regret that I didn't continue with it. And there was also quite a few things that stopped me from doing it, you know, that time. Well, my mother pushed me, saying, go, go, you know, we'll look after you and blah blah blah, and after the baby and things like that. And then my husband wanted to get married, but anyway then we got engaged. Ja, I was young, I was quite young, I was twenty years old, twenty going twenty-one. So...

Int So then you didn't continue with teacher training...

EW ...No, and I regret it today. So I just basically then left on my second year.

Int And then what happened after that?

EW After that, then I started and said, ok, let me go and do a secretarial course and I'll continue in that basis, which I did. And look, what I'm doing now, I like what I'm doing and what I...I went into a PR company actually which was very nice...initially it was very nice...

Int ...So after you finished your secretarial course?

EW Ja, I went into a PR company, I think I was there for about a couple of months, then I got into another organisation which was more of a...AEG, some German company, AEG, Bauer, electrical...what are they all called...they're all appliance companies and I got in there as an admin...administrator type of thing, and I worked there for thirteen years, can you believe it...

Int Gosh, a long time. And this must have been right through the 1980s?

EW Yes, right through the 1980s, that's right. And I started here 1995, Vesta (Smith) actually said to me I'm leaving, I'm retiring, and they've asked me if I know of somebody that's as good as her is, and ja, she said to them, ok, I think I know somebody, I'll see if she's interested and blah blah, and I came in for the interview and that first day I'll never forget Derric Reid, the old man, you must actually interview him, he's a very interesting old man. Derric Reid, Shehnaz Meer, I think you've interviewed Shehnaz Meer?

Int Sure.

EW Ja, they interviewed me, and Geoff Budlender. And I went in for the interview, they really liked me, I don't know what did they see in me (laughs), but anyway...and yes, so they said they'll let me know, and just as I got home, the phone rang and they said, you've got the job, you start on the first.

Int So you left AEG thereafter...?

EW I left the company, ja. It was a bit...you know, but I just thought to myself, no, let me get into a calmer environment, because that was a very, very busy environment, let me get into something calmer and perhaps it would be nice to learn...you know, to

start learning about the justice system and things and it would be nice, you know, and as LRC...

Int Has the LRC proved to be calm?

EW Ja (laughs)...so it was actually...I don't regret it, ja, I don't regret it and...ja.

Int So you've been here now for thirteen years.

EW It's going to be thirteen years in September. I enjoyed it...I enjoyed it, ja.

Int So I want to take you back. Before you started working here, you must have been aware that Vesta (Smith) was working here...?

EW Hmm.

Int You must have heard about the LRC, I wonder what you'd heard?

EW No, no, no, I've read a lot of...she used to bring home and give to everybody in the family these pamphlets of what they do and it was a lot on the news of whatever LRC is involved in and things in the newspapers and things like that. And I used to be quite interested, you know, in the work that they did. Definitely.

Int So I'm also wondering, in terms of...you started working here, was Geoff (Budlender) the Director at that point?

EW Yes, Geoff (Budlender) was the National Director.

Int And you started working in the National office?

EW Yes, I started working in the National office. That time they were in Pritchard Street, in the old Elizabeth House. Ja, Geoff was the National Director, Derric Reid was one of trustees but he was based in the office. Shehnaz Meer was then the Regional Acting National Director, she was...during that time.

Int Ok. So what was it like coming to work at the LRC. You'd been in one place for so long, the AEG, so now you had to make the transition, what was that like?

EW Look, it was a bit...at the beginning, it was a bit tough and a bit scary too, because now I'm coming in to a totally different world, you know, different environment, everything. And...ja, it was a bit scary but it took me...what, within a month I actually got used to...the first thing you had to get used to the people because if

you're not going to be happy with the people you work with then that is a big problem, you know? So...because where I come from it was like a family, you know, we had to work like a family. And ja...so it took me about a month, it was a bit scary the first week, two weeks, and you start having like this homesick from your previous job, you know, oh, I wonder shouldn't I just go back? Will I get used to this? You know, that type of thing. Ja and...no, but I got used to it quickly. It was actually very nice. It was exciting because when I started, they started giving me quite a lot of, you know, different things to do and you read through and see what exactly the organisation does, all the things...look, sometimes you just hear that they're doing this and this and that. But when you physically see and read through the stuff that they do, because I used to help the lady in the fundraising department, Christina Landsberg, and she used to give me a lot of chores as well, and then I would read through and even her reports that she does and I used to read through and things like that, so it was quite interesting, ja. The beginning it was, ja, it was a bit scary, you know, new environment after so many years, a change...

Int Do you do the same things that you do now that you did then?

EW No.

Int How has your work description changed?

EW Look, I started off just as an admin receptionist at the National office, which...it was a bit boring job, and then I started taking on the...they gave me quite a few things to do. I then started doing more admin stuff like the capturing of the people's timesheets and then we started...I started helping the lady, Christina (Landsberg), in the fundraising department, you know, set up things for her, appointments, and then...she used to do a lot of...then the functions came where they had to now raise funds and then having banquets and stuff, I used to get involved in that as well. So it was like, you know...and then as the years went on I started getting involved in more things and more things and more things and ja...up till now that I'm now all rounded (laughs).

Int Yes... I can imagine.

EW Doing just about everything and I understand, and then whatever people throw at me I just take it on because, you know, it's a challenge, and...actually that's how you learn and then you don't get bored from your original job, you know, the more you take on...it's just the only problem is that the more you take on, people expect you to do more, which sometimes it can be...

Int Very stressful...

EW Ja.

Int I'm also wondering...it's interesting because when you started at the LRC the funding situation had just started getting bad but not at that time, so funding wasn't an issue.

EW At that time it was actually...it was still...I think Christina (Landsberg)...and she was alone, we had one person in the fundraising department, which was her. That was 1995.

Int And her name is Christina (Landsberg)...?

EW Christina Landsberg. I think she's in Australia now. She...and by 1997...or 1998, I think, she left. And I think after she left that's where the dip started. Then we moved to Braamfontein, I think we moved to Braamfontein in 2000. Ja, and I think that's where all this started, where we started getting the...look, when we moved, they said, ooh, no, things are fine, but I remember the first year when we moved we were told we can't get the increases we normally get, things are going bad. But then again the place started expanding as well. They had three people...three to four people, they actually had, where they had...and the fundraising department where they had one person.

Int I see. I'm also wondering, you were really moved around with the National office and the National Directors changed....

EW Yes.

Int I wondered whether you could talk about that, what the different directors were like, and how the organisation under each of those directors has taken on a different personality, as such?

EW Ja, look...ok, the first, when I just started, like I said to you, Geoff (Budlender) was National Director at the time but I think he was about...there was...you know, sort of news, that he was going to leave. You know, he was going to the Department of Land Affairs. And so, at that time, ok, I can't say much then but then after that we had Bongani Majola that came in...ok, that was I think in 1997, he started...ja...um...look, I must say he was a very remarkable man, you know, and he had his ways that he came from the University of the North, I think...and ja, he had a different way of running things...the organisation, but it was very professional, I must say. And...ja, he...well, look, he did a lot of change, he did quite a bit of change, from what the organisation was in the past. Ok, the only thing was with the staff, the staff increased a hell of a lot, you know, where we would have had, for instance, Tilly Meyer in the finance department, Tilly would do finance and she would do HR at the same time. When they changed, you know, like in his time, there was like three people in the finance. Actually two people in finance and two people in HR.

Int So four?

EW Yes, which there's now three people salary wise, you know what I mean, it's not low salaries type of thing, people in the low salary bracket. And then that's how things started changing and I think that probably also took a toll in the finances. You know, obviously increasing staff so much, and I mean, the National Director had a personal assistant plus a secretary. All those type of things. And that's, I think, where it started expending and that's probably where things started...obviously funds and...the funds weren't coming in also I think as it should have. And that even the fundraising department they had director of fundraising, then they had two fundraising offices, like I say, and then plus they had an administrative assistant fundraising, so plus the one they would have had four or five people.

Int You mentioned earlier that Bongani Majola's style of managing, of directing, was a bit different, in what view was it different?

EW Look, I think it's because he came from a university. He was very professional, the man is hardworking, but very professional. He was very, very professional the way he did things, you know, nothing goes past without a letter or an email confirming it. There's no verbal things, you know, so he was different in that way. Um...any other way...ja, basically it was that, which was like a totally different style of management, you know. But I think it was good for the organisation but I don't think it was good in the sense of expanding the staff.

Int Sure. So then there was Odette Geldenhuys who was his deputy?

EW Oh yes. Odette (Geldenhuys) actually...ja, Odette (Geldenhuys) was the deputy still while we were in town. By the time we moved to Braamfontein Odette (Geldenhuys) was no more deputy. Ja, she was the deputy, I forgot about her actually, sorry.

Int That's ok. And then at some point Vincent Saldanha came into the...

EW Yes, after...ok, when Bongani (Majola) used to go on leave, or sabbatical, or whatever, long leave, then Vincent (Saldanha) would be acting. And then when Bongani (Majola) eventually left now then they asked Vincent (Saldanha) also to act during that time. You know, I think...look, he was a very good director...

Int Vincent Saldanha?

EW Ja. But I think the fact that he...he was based in Cape Town most of the time.

Int That must have been hard?

EW Ja, I think for him on him also, and I think therefore we were told that he wouldn't accept that post as a permanent post because of, you know, the travelling up and down and his family's not prepared to relocate to Jo'burg, so obviously he can't relocate to

Jo'burg. So it was like a...most of the time he was in Cape Town, and you know, just come for a week and then he's two weeks in Cape Town, you know, and I think that management is not good because obviously the staff needs that driver, you know, to...

Int So after Vincent (Saldanha)... Vincent was National Director from 2000?

EW Ja, it was for a...ja...no, no, not 2000, it must have been after, we moved to Braamfontein 2000 and I think we had Bongani (Majola) in Braamfontein for two years before he resigned so it could have been 2002.

Int And then Vincent Saldanha acted...

EW Ja. And then after Vincent we had Steve Kahanovitz, but that was only when we came up here, that Steve (Kahanovitz)...so Vincent managed that, I think, for a year. 2003 to 4, we moved here, 2005. And then Steve (Kahanovitz) was acting as well.

Int Right. And then after that was it Janet Love?

EW Was Janet (Love), ja.

Int Ok. So how has the organisation changed now that the National office and the Regional office are together.

EW Has matched, ja...Look...look, for us to move in with...ja, I mean, have one office, the National office and Jo'burg office, I think it's actually something very good because, I mean, for us now as staff of the National office we also sort of learn more also now about how they operate. Before it was just a verbal thing, you get told, this is how we operate. But you physically see now how things happen, you know, which is nice. And it's nice for us to be interacting, like now for instance they've asked me to be a representative for the admin staff and come to the meetings...

Int That's great.

EW ...for the lawyers on Monday morning and then I must take my own minutes and then I give it in our admin meeting, which actually is nice. Because now I also get to know about the cases, what's happening...

Int Absolutely. Have you started doing that?

EW I started now, it's three months, ja, it's going for the third month. It's interesting. Very nice, it's just now and then, you know, you sit and these people, blah blah blah, a bit off (laughs), you just, oh, what was that name? But what I do, I just leave it and I would ask the person afterwards, what was the name of that client that you

mentioned? Or whatever. So ja, it is actually quite nice to actually be part of the Jo'burg office.

Int So there's actually some positive changes?

EW Look, there is, I must say. ok, look, with Janet also, she also has a different style of management, but the way I see like, I think she will bring in quite a bit of funds, things for...and like, as we were told, that there has been quite a bit of funds that came in, so there is light for the LRC, which is nice.

Int It's very nice, yes, absolutely...

EW Which is actually very, very nice at the end of the day. It wouldn't have been nice to see them closing...look, the only thing that did affect people when they retrenched in 2006. That was very, very sad.

Int So they retrenched admin staff or lawyers?

EW They retrenched admin staff. They started off on admin, they said they would go lawyering, but it didn't go as far as the lawyers, so there was quite a bit of admin staff. I think it was twenty staff members across the regions. And the Pretoria office completely closed. Ja, so that was a bit sad, you know, but it could have been worse. But we believe now things are picking up, which is nice.

Int Absolutely. I also wanted to ask you, you've been here for a long time but when you were here earlier from 1995 there were far more lawyers, and now it seems to me that even with the merger of the Johannesburg office and the National office, there's still very few actual lawyers, and especially senior lawyers, do you get a sense of that?

EW Ja. The only think that I'm concerned...ja, as...look, before I know, that, I mean, the LRC must have also some black lawyers, which now in the...especially now at the Jo'burg, I mean, I don't think they have employed black lawyers since Thami (Mbatha) started. Ja, I think Thami (Mbatha) was the last black lawyer, and I mean, Thami (Mbatha) wasn't here long. And it would be nice. I see they've employed a lot of advocates doing constitutional litigation. But they should actually come in still I think with a black lawyer or a black advocate or, I don't know what the problem is, can't they find anybody in that...

Int Well what's often used as an argument and it is said that since apartheid ended the LRC has found it very difficult actually to actually employ highly skilled and good qualified black lawyers, because they're immediately snapped up by corporate firms who can pay them so much more...

EW Pay them much more. Look, that is true but I don't think that they search hard enough. I don't think they search and I actually think they should also start sort of...I mean, they must advertise these things. If they need a black lawyer perhaps, they must advertise. They're not advertising. I mean, it's just a matter of people just bringing you, just see somebody starting because this person knows Johanna or whoever, and they just get the job, which I think is wrong.

Int Right, fair enough. I also think, from what I can gather, early on in the LRC there were very, very strong...they might not have been black, but there were very, very strong black lawyers, there was Mahomed Navsa, and then there was white lawyers like Charles Nupen, Karel Tip, Paul Pretorius, there's a long, very strong tradition of good lawyers, and somehow it seems that when apartheid ended that kind of changed in that there aren't that many senior lawyers, and so in terms of actual training, I'm wondering what your sense is of the young people in this organisation that come through, for example, like the CAs and Article Clerks?

EW I mean, for them...ja, you see it's difficult, for them to actually...the training part I think it would be important for them, especially now that...I mean, if you look at with the Labour Relations Act, they've got to have a certain amount of each Indian, coloured, black, whatever, and I think they are going to get into big trouble. I think LRC is going to get into big trouble the fact that they're not keeping with that, you know. There's more white and then there's coloured, and Indian, but on the black side of lawyering...I'm not talking about admin staff...I think they are going to lose out very badly or they might be fined or whatever. So I don't know how they're going to...but I still think they should actually train...I mean, if there's good CAs, black CAs, like for instance that Bongamusa (Sibiya) guy, he's excellent.

Int Is he here?

EW He's here now. He is excellent and I think everybody says he is going to make a good lawyer one day. And somebody like that, that you can see he's got potential. Somebody like that, push the child, push the youngster, and let him get the training and make sure when he's finished you offer him a job and you push him. He's not just going to leave here because ok, LRC is not paying what the corporate law firms out there...the fact that if he just sits back and he think...and I mean, what they can do they can make him binding for two years, let him do a binding contract for two years, offer him that salary, but he is a good lawyer, and you'll find people like that because he's got a passion for what he's doing. You can see, and if you interview him you actually...you will actually see...

Int I will definitely interview him now, thanks for referring him.

EW ...you'll actually see it. People like that, and they should actually start doing that to try and get their black lawyers.

- Int The other thing, Esmé, is that historically the LRC, given that it's South Africa and apartheid has been....there has always been racial tension, maybe some gender tension, maybe that was more in some other offices, but always been racial tension. I'm wondering when you started off and subsequently till now, what are some of the racial tensions, I mean, is there still that black staff feel that they haven't been treated well or is it regarded as a white-led organisation...that's how it was perceived in June in the 1980s, I'm wondering whether that's still the perception?
- EW It's a bit difficult, you know, it's a bit difficult to say to you, but you hear these things still in the corridors or when a particular incident happened or if a new person gets employed and then you find that people would still have that, to say, oh, is this becoming a white organisation now? What happened to the...for the underprivileged, for the previously disadvantaged? What happened? That type of thing, you still hear these things in the corridor. But I think that's some...I don't know, I think that's something that will never die.
- Int Do you think it's a function of the society you live in where...?
- EW Mm, definitely.
- Int Sure. Ok. The other thing I wanted to ask you was that, I've interviewed some of the paralegals and I'm always struck and impressed with the kind of work they do, they're really in the frontlines, but one of the things that comes up a lot is that before the LRC offices were really inundated with people, so there were long queues of people coming here in the past, and now that's no longer the case. I'm just wondering what's happened, what's changed, where people are no longer coming to the LRC?
- EW Look, I think, first of all LRC I think needs to improve their marketing...I would call it marketing, advertising marketing. There's so many people out there that's never heard of the LRC. Or people that know that they can...that you know, I'm talking about now, especially people, the average or the poor person that doesn't know where to go for help. They've never heard of the LRC. So I still think during those years I can't say to you why there was queues, many queues, or it could be that there wasn't so many of this type of...there's a lot of NGOs now I think, so the competition might be a bit bigger than those years. Those years you find that a lot of the people were ANC members and it was mentioned at the ANC meetings, rallies, or whatever, to say if they need people like, you know, George Bizos was the big guys those years, being with Mandela and things like that. So all those things perhaps those years has made the queues to be so long. But now it has actually died down, a lot of people, you know, I mean, don't...there is other organisations that...
- Int There's always been that tension, Esmé, where lawyers feel that they can't be seeing all these people that come off the street and they should be concentrating on the high impact cases, cases that make legal precedent. What's your sense of that? Where do the people go; the ones who come off the street?

- EW No, but I mean, that's what this organisation is all about! That's who we should really be catering for. You know, irrespective if it's not going to be something that's going to give them that big winning in court or whatever, they're supposed to be helping these people off the street because those are the people that really...and if you actually, out of that hundred people you'll find that at least sixty or seventy of them it's valid stuff that also can be taken to court and where people can really be helped and where they can win cases, I would think, you know...
- Int I'm also wondering, Esmé, there's often this sense that the LRC during apartheid, it was actually fighting a battle against a common enemy, the apartheid regime, but subsequently when an ANC government...the LRC has a reputation for having taken on key cases against government, the TAC case, Grootboom,, but some people whom I've interviewed would say that's not enough, the LRC doesn't take enough cases against government. What's your sense as someone who works here, reads the newspapers, may talk to people, what's your sense of that?
- EW I think it is so true, hey, that is so true. They should actually...there should be, but then at the end of the day, I don't know, I just feel that it seems like they're so scared...I don't know...
- Int Really?
- EW Mm. I think it's more the...
- Int What do you think about the fear, where is it coming from? What's the fear about?
- EW I think it's because, I don't know, it's probably people's past or even their current at the moment, they might be big...big things in the government. I mean, I think we have people that works here that is in the government that would also, is involved with a lot of things in the government. And I think it's probably all those type of things, there's going to be a clash.
- Int So you think it's a conflict of interest?
- EW Mm.
- Int Fair enough, I think that's a valid point. I'm also thinking...you've worked here for a long time, what do you think of ... funding is a huge thing and it seems to be that the LRC is going to improve in that respect, how would you like to see the LRC change for the future of South Africa and public interest law? If I gave you an ideal scenario, what would that be?
- EW Look, I...I would actually...well, it's a bit of a difficult one...

Int What about...would you say that you need a stronger library, would you need more lawyers, would you need more CAs, more training, more...tea.

EW (laughs)

Int Tea every day at ten o'clock...

EW No.

Int What are the kind of things that would make you happy?

EW Look, I...well, I think people must just be treated equally. All staff.

Int You mean racially?

EW Racially and...

Int Admin, professional?

EW Admin and professional. People just need to be treated...

Int Well?

EW Equally. That's all.

Int I've interviewed a lot of people and a lot of people tell me, even now, they've been in the LRC in the 1980s they tell me, the LRC was like home, it was like a family.

EW It was.

Int What's changed?

EW Look, obviously...look, it's not like that anymore, I mean, the staff complement has dropped...ok, it has increased, like I said to you we had two people in finance and it increased to three or four people. That has increased. But, you know, they've done the retrenchments, we've got more cases, we've got a lot of cases and I think the admin work also therefore then increases but the staff is now not there anymore, you know. And that people are working under a hell of a lot of pressure. One person would do three people's work. So at the end of the day there's not much time...like we used to have a tea-time every day, that's one thing with Bongani, he used to make sure we have our half an hour tea break, no matter what you're doing, leave it and it's time for

us to come and sit down, whether we talk of home business or work, we sit and we have our tea for half an hour and back to work.

Int That must have been nice...

EW Which was nice. Once a month we would buy cake, two cakes or three cakes, and it was actually like home. They used to have nice Christmas parties, which I think every company really should have a Christmas party for staff, which is, it's the end of the year and it's a token of saying, thank you guys for your hard work for the year, and they should actually...but that's actually died down as well. We go out...I mean, our Christmas party is like Christmas lunch I should call it, those years it was called a Christmas party. Christmas lunch now it's like, ok, we try and find a cheap restaurant, guys see how much, ok, a hundred rand a head, per person, we go out, it doesn't even feel like a Christmas party and back and here you are, you go for that hour, you come back and that's it. You know, those years it used to be, proper Christmas party, we'd go on, even on a picnic day. Buy the meats and the booze or whatever, and they'd braai at the picnic at Rhodes Park or whatever...

Int This was during Bongani Majola's time?

EW Ja, and before. But all those things has changed. We just work (laughs), basically, put it that way, it's just work, work, work, work, work. But ok, fine, at the end of the day we understand the money's tight...the money's tight, but...ja.

Int I'm also wondering, Esmé, in terms of...there have been recent attacks on the judiciary, judges are called counter revolutionary, do you worry about the LRC, because it's a public interest law organisation and its task is to take on cases, whether they're against government or politicians...Do you worry about an organisation like the LRC and the future of it in this country?

EW I think so, ja. I think so. Ja...I think so, ja, definitely.

Int I'm also wondering, you've worked with a lot of people, across time. I've gotten to know you well, because I've needed your help so many times and you've always delivered. I'm wondering, in terms of the type of work you do, there must have been people, whether it's lawyers or admin staff or anyone, that you've particularly found really nice to work with or that you've shared lots of camaraderie with, is there anyone in particular or is it across the board?

EW Look, I mean...you should know me by now...I'm just a go-getter, I get on with anybody, irrespective what the person...whether it's now the boss now and he's now one of those, I somehow just...I somehow just get on, I just get along with everybody, you know, irrespective, people would complain and say, oh, that's such a horrible person! But to me I would find that, oh, well, agh, we all have our roles and our

moods and our whatever, and I somehow just happen to overcome it and I just...I'm friends with everybody basically.

Int Well that's good.

EW Even if I get...really that's just the type of person. I mean, Janet (Love) asked me the other day, what's happening here...what did she say, she said something about, because all these CAs are always around me, you know. and she would ask, what's it...I said, no, I'm just giving them advice. Sort of like a mummy advice type of thing. Nothing, you know...and she was just saying, what's this, every time I come here and they're around you, what's happening? So I said, no, they're just licking the chocolates off, that type of thing, and that's just my personality, that's the type of person, so...I don't have preferentials and say this one was better than the other one, that type of thing, but...

Int Was there a lawyer that you've been particularly impressed with in terms of the work they do?

EW Umm...ja, look, over the years...look, we haven't been involved in much, like I say, we were separated from Johannesburg office. It's only since 2005 that we now came together so we know more and we also read cases and things like that, but the Cape Town office I think they do excellent work. You know, Henk (Smith) is just a...I actually think Henk (Smith), you know, with all his fighting with the Richtersveld and all that, I think that was actually great. I think that was great. So he actually did...ja.

Int inaudible...

EW Um...look, I don't know the detail, I just know that LRC had to hand up on that case, you know, because of a whole lot of other stuff with Alexkor and things like that. Ja, but I don't know the full, full detail...

Int But he's...

EW But for the years that he...and I mean, any of the communities, I mean, those places out there in the Richtersveld, and all those places where he goes to, I mean, those communities are so down to earth and they, you know...and he's really, I think he's been like their hero and like a father and everything to them and then, I mean, you look at the pictures that he's...with them, it's like he's part of the group, of the community. So I really...ja, I must say that I was very intrigued with that.

Int Esmé, I've asked you a range of questions, I'm wondering if there's something I've neglected to ask you that you feel should be part of your LRC Oral History interview?

EW Um...I don't think there's anything else. I think you did from A to Z with now leaving no letter of the alphabet out.

Int Ok. The other thing I'd like to ask you maybe to end the interview would be to share any memories you might have, having worked here for such a long time, whether it's a particular person, a client, or just a general memory, that's made you laugh or cry or feel sad or feel rewarded; it could be anything that stands out for you?

EW Mm. Look in a sense of sadness I would say, because we've lost a person...

Int Pinky Madlala?

EW Pinky (Madlala).

Int Tell me a little bit about her.

EW Look, Pinky (Madlala), I must say, she...that woman was a remarkable woman, you know. I mean, there was a time when we moved up here, she was just started getting sick, where I could physically see what, you know, how she actually handles the clients and how she would help. She wouldn't turn people away. She would never turn, even if it's something that she knows that we might not be able to help, to really assist right through, but halfway through and she would make sure the person gets the right context and whatever, oh she was a remarkable woman. That touched me, her death. And then we also had somebody that died, Moffat Khumalo. All those things, it's things that I'll never forget because I was close to those people, fairly close, ja. Other than that...hmm...I can't think right now...I can't really think right now...

Int Ok, thank you for that. Esmé, it's really been a pleasure to interview you, thank you very much for your time.

EW It's my pleasure.

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