

Nomfundo Somandi

LRC Oral History Project

3 September 2008

Int This is an interview with Nomfundo Somandi and its Wednesday, the 3rd of September (2008). Nomfundo on behalf of SALS Foundation in the United States, we really want to thank you for agreeing to participate in the LRC Oral History Project. I wondered whether we could start the interview, if you talk about your early childhood memories growing up in South Africa under apartheid and where you think of social justice, injustice, right and wrong developed?

NS Okay, I was born here in Grahamstown in 1962, ja in the Fingo village, ja. My mother was a single parent, so we are five in the family, so my, I started school in Grahamstown in the township and then after that I went to Alice, ja, to complete my Senior Certificate. And then I started in 1988, neh. My cousin-sister was working for the Legal Resources Centre, in Port Elizabeth, ja, so my brother was in Robben Island. So Legal Resources Centre helped us a lot, whilst my brother was in Robben Island.

Int In what way?

NS Because we didn't have money for the lawyers so we contacted my cousin-sister in Port Elizabeth, so we approached the attorneys there in P.E. So they told us about the Legal Resources Centre, so when I started here, my brother was still in Robben Island, ja and it was difficult at that time. But Jeremy (Pickering) was understanding and Peter was working, Peter Hathorn and Gerald (Bloem), they were understanding, and they used to give me leave to go and visit my brother and they were making the bookings and all that stuff. So, I was visiting my brother in Robben Island.

Int How long was your brother in Robben Island?

NS He was in Robben Island for 15 years.

Int Gosh...

NS Ja, because he was a terrorist but he was a freedom fighter. Because he was in Tanzania. He skipped from South Africa to Tanzania, ja. So, when they came back, neh, so they were arrested. So, they were kept in Robben Island. So, they used to give me leave and they used to make me bookings, and send (inaudible -name of person), who was active at that time. So, she was trying to book me the accommodation in Cape Town and all that stuff and my parents, so we were visiting my brother, almost, almost every quarter, ja in Cape Town. So, when I started here, Jeremy (Pickering) was a Director, but he was friendly. He was using the back office. You won't see Jeremy (Pickering) because he used to come here at the back. You won't see him but when he is there; he will phone and tell me, that I am in the office. He was quiet. And then Clive (Plasket) started. Oh, he was also, very, very quiet and after that, after Clive (Plasket), it was Mark (Euijen). Ja, Mark (Euijen) was harsh but what I liked

from Mark (Euijen), neh, he, he was a straightforward person and Mark (Euijen), can't, doesn't, Mark (Euijen) treat, you know, Mark (Euijen) treat you like a human being. And Mark (Euijen) doesn't have friends in the office, so he was treating us equal, whether you are black or white. And if he is moody, he is moody for everybody (laughter), you know, that is what I liked with Mark (Euijen). And then, when Mark (Euijen) started here, I was a receptionist, ja. So, Joan Heckries, there was a problem with Joan, our administrator, so Mark (Euijen) approached me. I was scared to take the job. But he make me strong, he said no, you can do this job, I promise you and I am going to help you. Just, try and do the books. He was helping me and then I, he was also showing me how to write the, how to do the cash book and...to reconcile the books as well. And then he...when we were busy with the budget, he said, okay, you are going to do the budget. He didn't even show me how to do the budget but he was confident that I was going to do the job, so I have done the budget and then he praised me about that. That is what I liked from him, if you are wrong, you are wrong, if you are right, you are right and you can feel that you are right. And if you are wrong, you can feel that you are wrong because he was straightforward. And then, he was training me in lot of things because he said to me later on, once, do you want to do the course for the para-legal course at Rhodes. I said no, Mark (Euijen), I can't do that, and he said, no, I wanted you to do that and you can do that as well. But, no I didn't want to do that, ja. So, he was confident that, you know, that I am going to do the job and that is what I liked from him. So, I, after Mark (Euijen), neh, Johan (Roos). Hmmm, Johan (Roos) was not, ja, Johan (Roos), Johan (Roos) used to do everything but I remember one time, he called me in the morning, you know, I am busy with the budget and Mark (Euijen) was in the office last night and I was here, it was during the weekend, so he said to me, I want you to do the budget, because Mark (Euijen), why are you doing the budget? Nomfundo can do this and then he gave me the budget, I have done the budget. And then after Johan (Roos) started, you know, ladies, ja, we have got differences, but, ja. Ja, but what worries me in this office, neh is retrenchment. Because there is no work in Grahamstown. Grahamstown is a small place, there is no work but they retrenched a lot of staff, admin staff.

Int In this office?

NS Ja, in here, in this office. There was, Beauty was working here as a messenger and a cleaner. Ethel was a receptionist and then was an administrator and so they...and Rufus (Poswa) and Cathy was a secretary, so they retrenched Rufus (Poswa), Beauty, Ethel at the same time. But after, I think after two months, they said, no, they are going to take Ethel, he (she) was working here for two hours, from 8-10, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. But they decided no, Ethel can come and work here, because I asked them, if I am on leave, who is going to work on my place, because I am doing the reception work and the books and all that stuff and the clients, there is also clients. So, they said, no, they are going to, what they are going to, they are going to take Ethel back, so he (she) is going to work three hours everyday from Monday to Friday.

Int A better deal...

- NS Ja (laughter). But it is not better, because they want me to do the books, neh and the books must be at National Office by the 7th of every month, so how am I going to do that, because there's the clients, there's the phone, you can't concentrate on your books, you know, ja. So, it is not easy and, and he (she referring to Ethel) is working but it is better than nothing because he (she- referring to Ethel) is getting something now, you know. And then Beauty was working at Chambers, Sarah (Sephton) organised a job for Beauty there, so she is working there. And they decided to take Rufus (Poswa) back. Rufus (Poswa) is doing everything. He is the driver, he is interpreter, he is a paralegal, he is a researcher, he is doing everything in this office. He is like a handyman, ja. He is like a handyman. So, even he is fixing everything in this office, ja. But he is very nice, he doesn't mind about that, he is doing the job, so this office can't operate without Rufus (Poswa), whether we like it or not. Ja, because Rufus (Poswa) will drive them all over the road, because they do not want to drive.
- Int I am going to take you a bit back. You mentioned growing up in Grahamstown and it seems to me that your brother must have been involved in the liberation struggle. How influenced were you by him?
- NS He was a quiet, very quietly, because when he skipped neh, to Tanzania...
- Int You didn't know?
- NS We didn't know, you know, we didn't know, so we only knew when he was arrested. He didn't even write us letter because he was at Fort Beaufort at the boarding school at that time, so we waited for him to come during holiday, but he didn't come, so we realised that he skipped.
- Int And then when you, so when he was arrested, your cousin was working at the LRC in P.E. office and then you got to know people there, and Jeremy (Pickering) was working there at the time and Fikile Bam?
- NS Fikile Bam was working there at the time and they said Jeremy (Pickering) was also working there but I didn't know Jeremy (Pickering), ja.
- Int Okay, so you had finished Secretarial school?
- NS Yes, I went here in Grahamstown. There was a convent here, a place to do the typing. I was doing the typing there, ja.
- Int And so when you finished that, did you get a job immediately here at the Legal Resources Centre?

- NS No, I started at Sundy, there was Judge Bonsile Sundy. He had an office here in Grahamstown and he was an attorney. So, he offered me a job in December 2007, no, 1997?
- Int 1987?
- NS 1987. December 1987. So, I started here in November 1988.
- Int Right, okay. That experience did that help you to work here?
- NS A lot ja, a lot ja, because we using typewriters at that time and then I remember when they call me for an interview, there was a typewriter here, so they gave me a letter to type and I was very fast, ja.
- Int So, you started here and you started as a receptionist?
- NS Yes.
- Int Okay, when you started, the office had just started hadn't it?
- NS Ja, in February 1988, ja.
- Int So by about November, you started and then I was wondering what were the major cases that you started doing?
- NS At that time?
- Int Yes...at that time.
- NS Okay, we were doing the dog bite cases, the labour cases at that time and there was a State of Emergency at that time, so they used to detain, the people, so those people used to come here, so Jeremy (Pickering) was writing letters to the prisons, ja, people were released after that.
- Int And then when Jeremy (Pickering) left, Clive (Plasket) took over, what was the main focus of the office when Clive (Plasket) started?
- NS Okay, when Clive (Plasket) started neh, he was focused on pension cases, and the land, pension, land and farm workers evictions.
- Int And with Mark (Euijen), what were some of the major cases?

- NS Mark (Euijen) used to go to advice offices. You know what, Mark (Euijen) used to go to advice office. We know when Mark (Euijen) goes, when they went to advice offices because they had a roster, you know. There were services, all the advice offices in the Eastern Cape, so Mark (Euijen) used to go to Transkei and Modina, so he used to stay there for two days. We know when he comes back, he will give us the report and you know, and we know that we are going to open a lot of cases, you know. Then he will ask me to type the reports, saying that okay, I visited this advice office, so I saw clients so many clients, the clients were, the cases were about this and this and this and that. So, we opened these files for those clients, ja.
- Int And I am also wondering in terms of, in terms of the advice office, those closed at some point, around 1994-95, would you say?
- NS Ja, I think so, ja
- Int So did that then make more people come here?
- NS Yes, ja, there was people, but not that much. For instance now, just seeing the people for the pension.
- Int Really.
- NS Ja, just seeing mostly pensions and few farm workers.
- Int So, if people have general issues, where are they going now?
- NS Like?
- Int For example, consumer issues?
- NS Oh, Legal Aid...Legal Aid Clinic...
- Int At the university.
- NS Ja, ja
- Int So, I was wondering, at what point...when you started I am sure, ...it was quite busy, there were lots of people...
- NS Ja...

- Int And that has changed somewhere along the line?
- NS Ja, it's changed a lot.
- Int When did that change?
- NS That changed recently because they said, neh, because the funders can't, we can't do everything, because we used to do the labour cases as well, you know and the insure consumer cases, so because they said the funders can't fund us for consumer and labour now. No, so that changed so we are dealing with pensions, ja, pensions and the few...
- Int I am wondering also in terms of you said that, as time has gone by, there is less staff, you have been able to take on more roles, but does that include when people call you and find out, what do you do, do you use the sniff test, do you refer to Rufus (Poswa), or do you try to...
- NS Okay, when the people come into the office, we have got a form there, neh. So, I have to screen that person to check what's problem, all that stuff. So, I am not referring, if it's a labour matter, I am not referring that matter to Rufus (Poswa), I know that I must refer that people to Legal Aid or Black Sash, you know and the consumer ones...
- Int There was...in terms of cases that you are taking on now at the LRC, do you just... if someone comes through the door, at what point do you realise that this is the case that Rufus (Poswa) must definitely intervene in?
- NS Okay, ja. I know Rufus (Poswa) is very good on pensions, you know, so if there are people that come here, with social, not the social pensions, let's say from work, if they were working and they didn't get your (their) pensions, I know that Rufus (Poswa) is good on that stuff, I am just referring those people straight to Rufus (Poswa) because I know he is going to solve that problem immediately.
- Int Over time, since 1988 till now, what have been the major tensions in the office? Have there been racial tensions, have there been tensions around women (gender)? What are some of the...every organization has tensions, in this office what have been the major tensions?
- NS I think that people who used to work here before, neh, they had that feeling, you know and there are people who are working here now, neh, they are here for money, you know. And to me, if I am not sure if I am correct or wrong, to me, it seems as if, they wanted to work here, because there is no boss to look, so they are going to sit here and do whatever they want to do, you know, because they can't work for the...let's say, they can't work for the government, you know, because you have to go to court there

and report, you know, ja, because Tabitha (Qangule) was working here neh. So, when she resigned, she said that she is going to work for Legal Aid, so she phoned me. She was working in Transkei, she said, Ma, there is a lot of work here, you have to report everyday, and you have to go to court everyday. I missing LRC, those coffees, because you are just having coffees there, no, they are not going to court; they are just staying, sitting there...

Int But if you don't go to court, how are most of the cases settled?

NS They are not going to court, they are approaching the...the advocates from outside.

Int Okay, so briefing advocates?

NS Ja, they are briefing...

Int There was a time when...I think when Clive (Plasket) was National Director; apparently the office underwent a lot of difficulties, what was your experience of that?

NS Okay, at that time, to me, I think that was a racial issue, neh. Because, at that time there was Jannie (Coltman), Gerald (Bloem) and Clive (Plasket), you know. We liked Clive (Plasket), we voted for Clive (Plasket) because National Director came in here, Bongani came to interview us. So, we said no, we wanted Clive (Plasket), because we said Clive (Plasket) doesn't have friends and he is treating us equally, so there was a tension between the Coloured and the whites. I must say, between the Coloured and the whites. So, we said, we decided to take Clive (Plasket), you know...

Int Again as...

NS Ja, as a Director, neh. But there was a tension now, because the Coloureds, I will say the Coloureds because Jannie wanted Gerald (Bloem) and Rufus (Poswa), they wanted Gerald (Bloem). So, we decided no, we wanted Clive (Plasket). All, some of the black staff wanted Clive (Plasket), you know, because he had those, he had the ability, ja.

Int But that then went to the AGM and there was a lot of difficulty there?

NS At the AGM, I can't remember, ja, but Clive (Plasket) was right for this office, ja.

Int Okay. You mentioned that Johan (Roos) was here and that he did most of the things for himself but as a Regional Director, and also in terms of the cases, what was the work like then when Johan (Roos) was the Director?

- NS Johan (Roos) was doing...because there was a project and on these project codes, neh, we had a project code by, I can't remember....NPO
- Int Yes, right...
- NS NPO, ja. Johan (Roos) was doing the NPO work.
- Int And I am also wondering you have mentioned that Mark (Euijen) was here, you started doing the budgets, etc? And then it seems to me, at some point, was it around the time of retrenchment, that that's changed. It seems that you are doing quite a few things? I wondered whether you could talk about that?
- NS I am, you know, when I mentioned that, I was trying to say that Mark (Euijen) was confident and Mark (Euijen) was making you to have guts right, you know, and to make you strong that you can do these things. But others, they won't trust you; I am not sure because if it is because of the colour or what, they won't give you that chance to prove yourself, ja.
- Int And now, currently, what are the things that you do now, in the office?
- NS I am doing everything in this office. We are starting at half past eight here, neh; I am starting at eight o'clock or before. I am buying milk because Ethel can't go and do the groceries, because she is here only for, for only three hours. I am going to Checkers to buy some of the groceries, some of the office groceries, and then I am helping Ethel to put in the toilet papers, and all that stuff and to make coffee for ourselves for two of us. And I am doing everything. I am making the bookings, you know, doing my books, checking the clients, screening the clients and the telephone, you know.
- Int You have worked in the office for a very long time, I am wondering what are some of the cases of clients that have come through the door, you might have heard about, you from with the lawyers, or other people, that you really feel is an example of the kind of work that the Legal Resources Centre does. What are some of the cases that you know about, for example yesterday, I had Mrs. Melitafa...
- NS Melitafa..
- Int Melitafa, but have there been other cases, that you feel makes you proud to be working at the Legal Resources Centre?
- NS Ja, because there was a client, neh. This client, neh, took a package, neh from his work, so he didn't settle the house. So, they wanted to sell the house. The attorneys from next door wanted to sell the house. So, Rufus (Poswa) intervened on that case. So, the wife of that...the wife neh, is working at Sitemba, so she was expecting a

pension, money the pension, so Rufus (Poswa) intervened, so they stopped the, the sale, and that client paid her house and so they are now staying in that house.

Int That is wonderful. Any other cases that you know about?

NS Ja, there is another case, you know, because there is a client used to come here for disability grant with her, with her daughter's sister, with her sister's daughter, so that daughter is mentally retarded, so now, another lady at Legal Aid phoned me last week or that week and told me that the uncle is taking the money from this child and the uncle is not staying with this child. Can't you intervene on that? So I spoke to Cathy about this and I said to Cathy, you know, your client and then Cathy phoned Bisho and spoke to them and asked them if they can take a social worker. The social worker can assess them neh, so that the money, because the uncle is not staying with this child, so the uncle can't get the money.

Int Is this uncle the father?

NS No, he is the uncle, ja. So, Cathy wrote to Bisho, he (she) wanted them to stop paying that neh, not to cancel that money but to stop until they have got somebody at the family who can handle the money, not the uncle, because the uncle is not staying with them. The uncle is just taking the money and going...coming back and didn't even buying them groceries.

Int So, this office does very important work?

NS Ja, ja...

Int Do you have any concerns about the office closing?

NS Ja, ahha, we will be worried if they do that. If the people from Grahamstown will suffer, you know, because Legal Aid is not doing everything, ja.

Int So, there is still quite a need?

NS Ja there is a need for this office...

Int Now that the P.E. office closed down, quite a while ago, do people from P.E. come here as well?

NS Ja, because Sarah (Sephton) used to go to Black Sash in P.E. and consult with the people there.

- Int I am wondering Nomfundo, I have asked you lots of questions, I am wondering whether there is something I have neglected to ask you which you think should be included?
- NS No.
- Int Nothing...
- NS (laughter)
- Int I wondered whether we could end the interview, if you share a particular memory whether it is working with any of the National Directors, Regional Directors, even someone from the National Office or a client or even in this office, with Rufus (Poswa) or other people, is there a memory of what it means for you, to be working for the Legal Resources Centre, given that you have been working here for twenty years?
- NS Ja, you know, I like the work that I am doing with the Legal Resources Centre, you know, what I like most is to help people, for instance now, there is clients here outside. These clients were here yesterday, Rufus (Poswa) was busy, so because in the township here, they are busy building the RPD houses, so they, if this property, if the owner of this property is dead, somebody from the family must have the appointment letter and the death certificate. So, they went to Master's office yesterday, they wanted to have an appointment letter, so at Master's they said no, they can't give them the appointment letter, because one of the family members were there already. So, they gave that person an appointment letter. And that person is not staying on that house. It's...in our culture, you know, we've got relatives...
- Int Extended family...
- NS Extended families, you know, so their brother had a child outside, not from...their brother is not married, he had a child outside, so that child when the brother died, that child took the death certificate, because the house was on brother's name on that child's father, so that child took the death certificate and do the appointment letter for that plot but she is not staying there and she didn't stay there, you know, these people were staying there for a long, they were born in that house, so now they can't get the appointment certificate because that child has got the appointment certificate and that child wanted to take them out of the house because she wanted to build the flats for somebody to rent, you know, so I like to do this job but it is not just.. Rufus (Poswa) I am sure, will help you them this...
- Int Nomfundo you have a big heart. Thank you very much for this interview.
- NS Alright, okay, thanks...

Nomfundo Somandi–Name Index

Bam, Fikile, 3
 Bloem, Gerald, 1, 7
 Coltman, Jannie, 7
 Euijen, Mark, 1, 2, 4, 5, 8
 Hathorn, Peter, 1
 Heckries, Joan, 2
 Melitafa, Mrs. 8
 Pickering, Jeremy, 1, 3, 4
 Plasket, Clive, 1, 4, 7
 Poswa, Rufus, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
 Qangule, Tabitha, 7
 Roos, Johan, 2, 7, 8
 Sephton, Sarah, 3, 9
 Sundy, Bonsile (Judge), 4
Beauty, 2, 3
Cathy, 9
Ethel, 2, 3

Cases:

Disability grant, 9
 Pension, 8-9

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