

HONORARY GRADUATE

Sheena Duncan

In awarding an honorary doctorate in law to Sheena Duncan, this university honours a woman who has for over twenty years been in the forefront of the struggle for racial justice in South Africa. Sheena Duncan has worked tirelessly in the Black Sash, the South African Council of Churches and other organizations to expose the evils of apartheid and to obtain relief for the victims of the system. By protest and publication she has mobilized public opinion against the pass laws, population removals, detention without trial, the death penalty and other violations of human rights. Through the advice offices of the Black Sash she has been instrumental in providing support and relief to thousands of black South Africans whose lives have been tormented by the bureaucratic procedures of apartheid. Today Sheena Duncan is widely acclaimed as one who can take much credit for the belated emergence of a human rights culture in South Africa.

Sheena Duncan (née Sinclair) was born in Johannesburg on 7 December 1932. She attended the Auckland Park Preparatory School and Roedean School, both in Johannesburg. At the latter, she was head prefect in 1949. Between 1950 and 1953 she trained as a teacher of domestic science at the Edinburgh College of Domestic Science, and in 1954 she studied dietetics in Glasgow.

In 1955 Sheena married Neil Duncan, an architect, in Johannesburg. At the time she was employed as a home economics officer in the Social Welfare Department of the Johannesburg City Council.

From 1956 to 1963 the Duncans lived in what was then Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, where their three children were born. In 1963 the family returned to Johannesburg.

Sheena Duncan's mother, Jean Sinclair, was one of the six women who founded the Black Sash in 1955 in protest against the Senate Act. In 1976 this university honoured Jean Sinclair with an honorary doctorate for her work in the Black Sash.

Jean's daughter Sheena has been active in the work of the Black Sash since her return to this country in 1963. She has held various positions in the organization, notably those of magazine editor, chairperson of the Transvaal region, director of the Johannesburg advice office since 1973, and National President from 1975 to 1978 and from 1982 to 1986. She is currently director of the Johannesburg advice office, and national co-ordinator of all the Black Sash advice offices, of which there are currently ten in major centres around the country. She is also a trustee of the Advice Office Trust of the Black Sash.

This list of Sheena Duncan's offices in the Black Sash cannot properly convey the leadership role which she has played in the organization. The Black Sash was founded as a protest organization, and for many years it saw protest as its principal function. Later, however, it shifted its emphasis to assisting the victims of apartheid, particularly those affected by the pass laws and by mass removals in the rural areas. Under Sheena Duncan's leadership, Black Sash advice offices have helped thousands of black South Africans, and they have offered concrete protection to family life and individual liberty against the depredations of the apartheid system.

The Black Sash and its para-lawyers have given assistance in thousands of cases in which conventional legal representation was beyond the means of the client. The Black Sash thus moved into a vacuum left open by the legal profession. In the process Sheena Duncan became an expert in many areas of the law affecting black South Africans. Few lawyers were able to rival her knowledge of the intricacies of the pass laws.

A committed Christian, Sheena Duncan has played a major role in the church's social justice programme in South Africa. She was a member of the Provincial Synod of the Church of the Province of South Africa in 1973, 1976 and 1979. In the early seventies she chaired a 'challenge group' in the Diocese of Johannesburg which worked for the elimination of racism in the church. She is currently a member of the Board of Justice and Reconciliation of the Church of the Province. She also represents her church on the committee of the Division of Justice and Reconciliation of the South African Council of Churches. In 1987 she was elected for a three-year term as Vice-President of the South African Council of Churches. In that capacity she has been deeply involved in issues such as alternative national service for conscientious objectors and an enrichment programme for young adults unable to re-enter the formal education system. In November 1988 the Bishops of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa made her a member of the Order of Simon of Cyrene. This is the highest honour bestowed by the Anglican Church on a layperson.

Sheena Duncan's work has not been confined to the Black Sash and the South African Council of Churches. Many organizations committed to human rights in South Africa have turned to her for support. To them she has given generously of her time, energy and advice. For many years she was active in the South African Institute of Race Relations, and she served on its council. She was a member of the founding committees of the Johannesburg Citizens Advice Bureau, of the Five Freedoms Forum, and of the Witwatersrand Network for the Homeless. She is chairperson of the Human Awareness Programme. In 1988 she became one of the five commissioners of the South African Human Rights Commission. A committed abolitionist, she played an important part in the revival of the Society for the Abolition of the Death Penalty in South Africa, of which she is a patron. She is also a member of the Independent Board of Investigation into Informal Repression, which has been investigating the activities of death squads in South Africa.

Sheena Duncan has received wide recognition abroad for her work in the field of human rights. In 1974 she visited the United States, at the invitation of its government, to study para-legal services. In 1987, in recognition of the work of the Black Sash, she received the Maurice Eisendrath Bearer of Light Award from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. In 1986, for the same reason, the Liberal International conferred on her its annual Prize for Freedom.

Sheena Duncan has contributed to the cause of social justice in South Africa through protest, publication, and the invisible depths of background work. As a protester, she is a forceful and inspiring speaker. As a writer, she has exposed the hardships of apartheid. Her work behind the scenes is less well known. But her influence there has been immeasurable. She has inspired others by her energetic example and her firm commitment to principle.

Today the influence of extra-parliamentary pressure groups in the public life of South Africa is accepted. It was not always so. For many years the Black Sash was the leading extra-parliamentary pressure group, and sometimes it was the only effective one. Its contribution was not acknowledged by the Government or by the white

public. Its members were vilified and harassed. Black Sash members who demonstrated against the pass laws and detention without trial were abused and arrested. Their advice offices were raided by the police. It took great courage, in such a climate, to continue to protest and to counsel. But the Black Sash persevered. The steadfast commitment of the Black Sash has had its effect on South African life. Today the evils of apartheid are recognized for what they are by many more South Africans, including many within government, than ever before. If a just society is achieved in South Africa, the Black Sash will be able to take much of the credit. It has kept the flame of justice burning in times of darkness.

In honouring Sheena Duncan we honour the Black Sash. But we know that no organization can survive or flourish without leaders. Sheena Duncan provided the Black Sash with strong and energetic leadership at times when it seemed impossible to continue. Today her influence has spread beyond the Black Sash. Supporters of racial justice throughout the country claim her as their own. She represents the working conscience of South Africa.