VOLUME 127 Reader's Digest DECEMBER 1985

Articles of enduring significance, in condensed permanent booklet form

In a country where whites and blacks barely communicate with one another, this courageous group of women has built precious bridges between races

THE BLACK SASH
Women Who Rage for Peace

By Victoria Butler

On July 20, 1985, from all over South Africa, tens of thousands of blacks streamed to a dirt football field at the eastern Cape town of Cradock to bury four black leaders who had been found brutally murdered.

Dust swirled as the swaying throng stomped to the beat of freedom songs. Many blamed pro-government death squads for the killings, and the air was heavy with anger. Then, incredibly, 14 mostly middle-aged white women walked slowly on to the field and stood silently with the mourners. The chants of the crowd gave way to applause and shouts of "Viva Black Sash!" "Viva Black Sash!"

The 14 were members of a remarkable group of women who, for 30 years, have fought stubbornly to rid South Africa of apartheid, helping blacks find a way through

the maze of laws that entwines them, dogging government officials and police, constantly exposing and protesting against injustice and suffering. In the process they have changed the lives of hundreds of thousands for the better.

"These incredibly brave women have put their lives on the line for years," says Nobel Peace Prize-winner Bishop Desmond Tutu. "They've shown blacks that there *are* whites who care."

Last year more than 26 000 blacks sought help from Black Sash advice offices in South Africa's eight major cities—15 000 in Johannesburg alone. Here, on any weekday, scores of people sit on sagging couches, rickety chairs and stools, waiting to explain their plight to Black Sash counsellors.

One of them, Beulah Rollnick, a matter-of-fact 59-year-old, sits in a small office scribbling furiously in a notebook. Georgina Mhlanga, a pretty woman in her thirties, walks in carrying a thick file. She's been here before in her struggle to prove

Below: Mrs Jean Sinclair, one of the founders. Below right: The Black Sash demonstrating against the revision of the Press Code in 1974. Right: Sheena Duncan, president of the Black Sash

PHOTOGRAPHS: THE STAR, JOHANNESBURG

that she was born in Johannesburg and therefore has the right to live there. Like many blacks she has no birth certificate. "It's a huge problem," explains Rollnick. "The majority of the people her age were born at home with only family members attending."

Without a birth certificate Georgina cannot apply for a reference book. Without a reference book she cannot live legally in the city of her birth. Under the guidance of the Black Sash, Georgina has gathered letters from people who have known her a long time—the minister of her church, teachers, employers. "This makes up a lot of our work," says Rollnick, "just proving people have rights." Georgina has a brother with urban rights. That helps. Georgina will write to the appropriate authority, asking for a reference book on the basis of the information gathered. Will she get it? "With luck," says Rollnick.

Rollnick's home is in the monied northern suburbs, not far from the house where the Black Sash was born. Thirty years ago this year, six comfortably-off suburban housewives gathered for tea. The conversation turned to current attempts by the Nationalist Government to strip people of mixed race of the vote they had held for more than 100 years. Like many other English-speaking South Africans they were furious—but unlike many others they decided to do something about it.

Within an hour they had phoned dozens of friends and acquaint-

Left: A lone protester keeps silent vigil in Jan Smuts Avenue. Above: Former Magopa residents return for a brief ceremony in the old graveyard

ances and organized a public meeting. Six days later, on May 25, 1955, more than 2 000 women from all walks of life strode silently behind a lone drummer girl through the streets of Johannesburg to the City Hall. The demonstration gave birth to a national campaign. The women called themselves the Womens' Defence of the Constitution League and launched two national petitions. Within ten days they had 100 000 signatures, all from women.

But the government was not swayed. Still, the members did not admit defeat. Donning black sashes to "mourn the death of the constitution" they held a 48-hour vigil at the government's Union Buildings in Pretoria, sleeping in bitter cold at the front of the massive edifice. This shivering demontration caught the public imagination and thousands cheered them as they gathered at the Johannesburg City Hall the next day. The press dubbed the organization the "Black Sash" and the name stuck.

The enthusiasm carried them to new, almost inspired protests. Silent women with black sashes slung over their right shoulders began following government ministers, dogging them at railway stations, airports and meeting halls.

At dawn on February 9, 1956, 60 cars emblazoned with black sash emblems started a 1 600-kilometre "Great Protest Trek" to Parliament in the Cape. Similar convoys left from towns in the northern and eastern Transvaal. Women from all over South Africa joined in.

By the time they reached Cape Town, 300 cars had joined the convoy. Thousands of people lined the city streets cheering, waving handkerchiefs and throwing hats in the air. South Africans had never seen a protest like it. "We were so naive," says Jean Sinclair, now 77 and one of the original founders. "We thought we were going to bring the government down."

Their demonstrations, however, changed nothing. On May 16, the bill disenfranchising people of mixed race officially became law. The government had won, and one minister was reputed to have chuckled: "Well, that puts an end to the Weeping Winnies."

Indeed, almost everyone expected these rather unlikely protestors to fold up their sashes and return to their comfortable suburban homes. Over the next two years, many did. But the thousand who remained were a new, tougher breed, many of whom perceived the great moral and political issues that would eventually leave their society torn with violence and isolated from the world community.

IT WAS a new style of Black Sash, but it was just as determined to take positive action. The chance came in 1960 when the government stepped up "influx control," a collection of legislation that still effectively denies freedom of movement to three-quarters of South Africa's

population. By then, 7,3 million blacks had already been arrested, fined or imprisoned under these laws. Spurred by the example of a Cape Town member who regularly organized bail money for women victims of influx control, members began to set up permanent advice offices where blacks could get help and guidance.

Noel Robb, wife of a prominent Cape Town financier, was in her mid-forties and a mother of five when she took over as director of the advice office in Cape Town. Soon she understood the intricacies of the laws better than the parliamentarians who had passed them. Today, at 72, she mans her office in a ramshackle house opposite Mowbray railway station four days a week. Moving briskly through the clutter of files and shabby furniture she listens to countless sad stories, helping those who tell them to manoeuvre through the maze of laws ranged against them.

Her eyes sharpen with anger as she hears the story of a man who has been dismissed by a well-known Cape Town company after 30 years, with no pension. She picks up the phone, calls the managing director, and in a voice that brooks no nonsense asks, "Why?" A meagre pension is negotiated. A small victory, but there is no time to savour it—a dozen more people are waiting.

Black Sash president Sheena Duncan reckons that advice offices successfully solve the legal problems of only six per cent of those who come for aid. A bare one per cent are referred to civil rights lawyers who fight and often win their cases in court. Another five per cent are referred to other agencies like trade unions, industrial courts and clinics. The Black Sash helps many more by just listening sympathetically to problems and by showing people how to fight for the rights they do have. And the test cases that Black Sash advice offices have fought have improved tens of thousands of lives.

Early in 1980, the Black Sash took up the case of Mehlolo Tom Rikhoto, a contract labourer who had worked for a Germiston engineering firm for more than ten years. The company had renewed his contract each year, but when Rikhoto applied for permanent residence, government officials told him he did not have the ten years' "continuous employment" he needed to qualify.

In what turned out to be the most significant court ruling affecting blacks since the National Party came to power, a Supreme Court judge ruled that Rikhoto qualified for permanent residence. Lawyers estimate that some 60 000 blacks gained the right to remain in cities as a result.

Some radical blacks have criticized members of the Black Sash for "working within the system," for "whitewashing" apartheid by helping to make it more palatable to blacks. Others disagree. Says Dr

Nthato Motlana, a member of the Soweto Committee of Ten and a leading anti-apartheid activist, "I admire the work done by the advice offices. They're unseen and unsung, but they provide a very valuable service." Ellen Kuzwayo, a Soweto writer and community leader, puts it simply, "Thousands of my people have used the Black Sash as their refuge. Thank God for those women."

A lot of Black Sash energy has been poured into exposing the human cost of the "homelands" policy under which some 3,5 million black people have been uprooted from established communities, stripped of their South African citizenship, and deposited in "national states," often on barren and undeveloped land.

Two years ago, the people of Magopa, a village in the western Transvaal, faced just such a fate. The local tribe bought the land in 1911 and developed it, without outside help, over the next 70 years. They built a primary and secondary school, two churches, sank boreholes, put up windmills, and cultivated the land so successfully that they regularly sold a generous surplus to the local farmers' co-operative. In government eyes, however, this peaceful and settled community was a "black spot"—freehold land owned by blacks in an area reserved for whites.

In 1982, the village was told it would have to move to Pachsdraai, a newly-developed site in the nearby national state of Bophuthatswana. On June 24, 1983, government bulldozers rumbled into Magopa, destroying the schools, the churches, houses and water pumps. But the majority of the people refused to move. They were given two weeks to get off the land.

The Black Sash mobilized diplomatic, press and legal support, applying to the Supreme Court for an urgent interdict to stop the move. On the eve of the deadline, Black Sash supporters and church leaders held an all-night vigil in Magopa. The next day, together with television and press reporters, they waited. Nothing happened. They had won a reprieve.

Thinking the fight was over, the people of Magopa collected R2 000 and began to rebuild their schools. A few months later 300 armed policemen returned, loaded up people and possessions and moved them to Pachsdraai.

Black Sash members were stunned. They had lost the battle, but in drawing worldwide attention to the plight of the villagers they had put intense pressure on the government to review its resettlement policy. This year it bore fruit—with the government announcing a moratorium on removals while it studies policy changes. If it is effective, the suspension will affect more than 200 "black spots" scheduled for resettlement.

RECENTLY, Black Sash president Sheena Duncan stood, undaunted

and alone, on a corner of Jan Smuts Avenue in Johannesburg with a placard protesting against the death in detention of labour leader Andries Raditsela. In 1982 the Internal Security Act empowered magistrates to forbid gatherings, and the women of the Black Sash often demonstrate alone. But they share a powerful bond—a passionate indignation at injustice. Jean Sinclair says it is fury that has kept the Black Sash going for 30 years. "I go to bed angry and I get up angry. Anger fuels us all."

The Black Sash enters its fourth decade at a time of unprecedented unrest. Yet Sheena Duncan, a deeply religious woman, still finds hope amid the anger. She feels that at last real change *is* in the air. "The economic crisis and civil unrest have left many whites fearful of the future. But many *are* seeking a new beginning—they just don't know where to start." This means there are unprecedented opportunities to influence events for the better, she says. "We fully intend to do so."