

Darlene Woodburn.
Inanda choir director, 1968-1973.
Interviewed via phone from California, 30 June 2009.

You came to Inanda in 1968. What were the motivations that inspired your family to come to Inanda?
My husband—Roger—was moderator of our church, a Congregational Church in Freedmont, California, and I was music director of our church, and we were sent as delegates to the general conference, and during we heard a missionary speaker. I'd always been interested in missions, but never as, you know, thinking about becoming one myself, I mean, I was just always fascinated with the missionaries that came to the church I attended as a kid, but I never thought I would get into that. Anyway, at one of the dinners that we had, the superintendent sent a map over to us, with actually Turkey circled on it, and asked if we'd be interested in going to Aleppo College in Syria, and at the time we thought, you know, that would be an interesting thing to think about, ended up going to Riverside Drive where the headquarters were, then the Seven-Day War broke out, they were bringing people home from there, instead of sending missionaries in, and then the Africa Director heard that we were there, and that Roger was a school administrators, and they knew that Lavinia Scott was thinking about retiring some time in the near future, so they asked, would we be interested in considering this job. And it's like, everything in our lives headed toward this being a good decision and the correct decision for us and our family, we have five boys—I mean, most people wouldn't think of going off to a country like South Africa, where they had apartheid, with five little boys, but it turned out to be a wonderful kind of adventure for everybody. The kids still talk about, and they love Africa just like their mom and dad do.

How old were your sons when you went there?

The youngest was seven. I had them all in four years, as of July 3rd, I'll have three of them who are fifty years old. I have twins who will turn fifty on Thursday, and the kid who's just older than them is eleven months older than them. Busy times, but it worked out!

Have any of them gone back to South Africa?

Ron, one of the twins, has gone back with me twice, and David has gone back with me twice, and I'm going to go again in December.

So you were appointed just to be the choir director?

No, I was appointed just to be the wife of the principal, actually. He started out as a teacher, and then I guess he was considered vice-principal—maybe that's not true. He was a teacher at first, then became principal when Lavinia left Inanda. I'm actually a nurse, so—but they didn't need me as a nurse, because they had an African school nurse, and I wasn't going there to replace anybody. I did do a little first aid and those kind of things during the holiday times, but basically they needed somebody to do the music, and I did counseling, but mostly I just tried to support Roger.

You were the first—the first principal that had a family on campus. How did that work out? Did that seem a pretty seamless transition?

Lavinia actually didn't want to leave, she wasn't quite ready to retire, but physically she was at the point where she needed to retire... Lavinia was a fabulous woman, and very gracious.

Generally, how do you remember Inanda Seminary students during your time there?

Well, most of them were from poor families, but really bright kids, and of course because I was involved in the music, finding that they were so wonderfully talented musically was just a gift to

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me, I thought. I got a lot more than I gave, I think. I was able to develop a group that did a lot of traveling around, and those were the kids I was mainly involved with, and that would be why people might remember me today, because that group, the Choralaires, became rather—I don't want to use the word famous, but in the black community a lot of people knew who they were. They were often on radio, and so a lot of people knew them. But in general, the students were *good* kids, all of them. They wanted to be there. Some of them I think were on grants of various kinds because their families didn't have money to get them there, and they were just really good kids from poor families, mostly.

So tell me a bit about the Choralaires. When did the group form? Where did you perform?

We did a lot of traveling every year. We went to outlying mission stations and we sang at a lot of—well, we sang for different organizations. My goal with that group was to sing in as many white schools as we could, because I soon realized that white kids had no chance at that time to get to know kids their own age but who were of a different culture and color, and—so of course they were afraid of them. If you don't get a chance to meet someone socially, you don't get to know them. So my goal with this group was to show white school kids, their same age, what great kids they were, what great girls they were. And we would go to sing for a white school—the other thing was, I had to know that the principal would allow some kind of a social time after the concert, because these girls were really talented! I mean, so much more talented than a lot of the white kids that we saw. So if the school would allow some kind of fraternization after the programs were over, I would feel like it was good to go there and sing. And I heard so many comments from white kids, who would say, 'This was the first time I have ever talked to an African as somebody who's my equal. I'm totally amazed at how much talent they had.' They did a lot of good, a lot of good work in the singing and dancing that they did. We did a program that would be secular, as well as sacred, as well as traditional, singing and dancing through all of those segments of the concert, and then socializing after the program was over. When I went back many years later and was staying with Gatsha Buthelezi's family, we went to church with them, and a man who was in the church said, 'I remember hearing the Choralaires forty years ago!' And he was still remembering that he had heard them, heard them on the radio, he knew some of the songs. For the African families, it was an important group. I don't know if you interviewed Peggy Msimang or Hixonia—

I haven't, but I've heard about them from their peers. You're still in touch with the girls from the group?
My husband just died, and I've heard from at least fifty of them over the past few months.

So you formed the group in 1969?

I think it was. And then Cybele Zondi, she took it over after I left, and she was a member of the group.

Students that you're in touch with now—what are their career paths?

Peggy is a principal of a teacher training college, and she just completed her Ph.D. in education, and has been in association with the country of Denmark, where she got a scholarship to do her masters' degree, and now they are sponsoring, with South Africa, this teacher training college. Hixonia is somebody who is so multitalented—on the boards of Lever Brothers, and all these

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leading companies. A lot of them are teachers, and social workers, I mean—they're just people who have become very successful in their own right.

When you were there, how do you remember relationships between staff members?

Most of the time everybody got along well. Little problems at the end before we left—I don't know if Roger talked to you about Shirley Deane.

Back to the Choralaires, actually—they recorded an album, didn't they? Was that a fundraiser?

Yes. Barbara Monaghan, who was a friend of Lavinia Scott and whose family had owned the paper company that made the US dollar bill at the time. One of the times she came, she said, 'I think you should do a fundraising album,' and she kind of sponsored that. When I was there in 2000—I usually try to go for the At Home—some of the girls in Cape Town had made CDs of it, and we sold quite a few of them in 2000...

During your time there, do you remember students and staff there talking about politics at all—I mean, talking about the environment that Inanda Seminary was in, and the ways that Inanda was very unusual. The goal of the school was to get those girls into university. When—what was the name of the organization—Steve Biko and Strini Moodley, what organization did they begin?

SASO.

They tried to start a branch of it at Inanda. Maybe Roger told you about this.

He didn't. He mentioned Steve Biko coming to the school and speaking.

Well, they wanted a branch.

A branch of SASO?

SASO, yes. That's it—there. But at the time, if you got your name on a government list, there's no way you would get into the University of Zululand, which was the only African university really open to them, and our goal was to get the girls into university. That's why we didn't learn Zulu, I mean, other than salutations and things, because they needed to speak English and be ready for university by the time they left there. Anywhere, when Biko and Strini Moodley tried to get us to start a branch there, we had to tell them no, and there was quite a lot of conversation at that time, it was in the paper. We had—the one hall in Durban that was owned by Indians, but Africans could perform there, we had given a big concert there, and had allowed multiracial people in, and that went over like a lead balloon, and was in the paper. So the kids, you know, the girls—I call them kids, they're not kids, they're girls—yeah, there was a lot of talk about politics. And partly, also, because the Buthelezi girls were all students there. At the time, Gatsha was very familiar to us, and to the rest of the people at the school—he was there quite a bit, so he's a political figure, and yeah, there was conversation about it. I think Inanda did a really good job in teaching these girls that, you know, though they lived in this apartheid society which was terrible they should be proud of themselves, and I actually think that was the goal of the American missionaries that were there, to say, 'You're just as good as anybody else.'

It was two of Buthelezi's daughters that attended?

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Mandisi and Phumzile. Phumzile is one that I am still in contact with, and Mandisi just died not too long ago, she had AIDS. And then Letixolo was a student there, so actually we had three of them.

And Chief Buthelezi was involved in the fundraising school, and the governing council.

He was. He came—we stayed in his home, I knew his wife, I still hear from him every Christmas, he calls me his sister, I love that man. I mean, I realize that there are people who don't think he's the greatest thing, but in his heart I think he's a really good man. But I also think Mandela was a fabulous man, and if they had problems, well then that was the way it was. And actually, just a little aside, Mandela's daughter Zindzi was Steven's—my oldest son—first girlfriend. So we've got all these political figures on different sides of the fence, but you know—I did meet Mandela the last time I was there, and I told him, 'You don't know this, but your daughter was my son's first girlfriend.' They went to Waterford School in Swaziland and they were in the same grade, that's how they got to know each other.

I was going to ask where you sent your children to school.

They all started in South Africa, but we had an agreement—because in those days when you got in high school, there was military training, and that wasn't going to work for us at all—and we had an agreement with the Board that when they got to that age they could go away to school, to a multiracial school, so they went to Waterford in Swaziland—4 of the 5 went there.

Do you know, to what extent Buthelezi was able to get money from the KwaZulu Government?

I really don't know, but I do think it's probably true. Shirley Deane was the fundraiser, and she got very familiar with Gatsha, and she was, you know, raising money... Is that name familiar to you? She wrote a wonderful book, it's about important black Africans during that period of time.

How supportive of Inanda do you feel the United Church Board, the Congregational Church of South Africa, these different bodies that were involved in the school's administration—how invested were they in it?

The Governing Council at Inanda was the final word, but there were people in the United States in the United Church office who were the money people. We had tried at one point to turn the school over to the UCCSA, but they didn't have money, so they couldn't support that school, and then when giving here started declining so much, then it was really a problem, how was the schooling going to keep running. You have students coming who don't have any money, so I don't know if—I would think that the money side of things was people here, but the running of the school was the Governing Council there.

Your family had to leave in 1973. That was because you were denied a residence permit, right?

Yes.

So why—how do you think that was politically motivated?

For sure. They gave us—we got a letter that said that an autonomous body has made the decision. We were there all the time on a temporary residency. We had to go in every year, take the kids out of school, get our pictures taken at their offices. They never would give us a permanent residency, always a temporary. And they were only supposed to give it for five years...

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Do you feel that there was state monitoring of Inanda during your time there?

Probably, yeah.

Do you feel that being American made you more or less vulnerable to government censure?

Well, I think they did want the school to stay open, and if the only way they could keep the school open was to keep Americans there, then they were going to not put on the pressure that would make us have to leave early. They wanted the school to be kind of an example. I mean, I always thought, when somebody would criticize them—like the American government might criticize the South African government for not allowing any private schools to remain open, because they had closed all of them except Mariannhill, which is a Catholic school, and Inanda—I always thought the government wanted to be able to say, ‘What do you mean, we don’t keep any private schools open? We have this school, Inanda Seminary.’ We were kind of their token. And they were forever bringing government officials out to see what supposedly the government was allowing to stay open.

Government officials from where?

From—just government officials from South Africa to see the school.

It might have had something also to do with the fact that Inanda was producing really skilled students and the state needed teachers, nurses, and all the professions that Inanda women were entering into.

Yeah, yeah.

Do you remember, during your time there, if students were aware of the school’s history at all, the traditions that Inanda had?

I think so, yes. Because that was a really important part of the school...

You’ve been involved with the school since you left—

I’ve been back five times. In 1999, I went back and I stayed for seven months, and I did music again. I lived in one of the houses there.