

Thembi Msane.
Inanda Seminary student, 1980-1984.
Interviewed in Durban, 3 March 2009.

You started at Inanda in 1980, is that right?

Yes. Were you able to get some information from that time from the archives?

Yes, I was able to find a lot of stuff on that period, and a lot of it is politically fraught, it seems, in the notes that they have on staff issues, etc. [Laughs]

[Laughs] That's good.

Okay, let's begin with your name at birth, and some background on your family and childhood.

My name is Thembi Lovely Ndlela, and I still use that name here and there, although I have my married name. I was born at Ngudwingi, in Eshowe. It is a highly rural area. That was where I grew up. My mother was originally from Ulundi. My father's name is Hamilton Ndlela, my mother is Thuli Ndlela. I went to school there for primary education. Then, my father was always a person that liked educated people, and liked the good things in life...

Why did he decide to send you to Inanda? Or did you decide to go to Inanda?

Yes, I am thinking about my father earlier, he was always saying, 'There are three schools'... He used to sit me down and say to me, 'You know what? When you get to this age, you will be in this grade, and I will take you to either this school' which was Dlangezwa, Mariannahill, and Inanda Seminary. And over the years I think as I grew up I think he was doing more research about the schools. When I was in Grade 7, he said, you have definitely got to go to Inanda, because he realized that my passing grades were good, because I was always in the top three of my class. But obviously this was just a rural school, it was not the best. But I was always there, like number one, number two, number three. So he said, definitely, you will go to Inanda Seminary. Then obviously he did the paper work. All I know is, one Saturday morning, he told me that, you are going to Inanda Seminary. I said, 'Really'? He said, Inanda Seminary, with Miss Gunn, Mrs. Koza, to be interviewed. I said, 'Oh, okay.' I realized that, you know what, to go to my school doesn't feel that special, because I didn't have to be interviewed, my father just drove me there, they gave me the books, and that was it. So, I thought to myself, okay, this must be different. So my father drove me to Inanda, I got there at eleven, for an interview with Miss Gunn, then, she was the administrator that interviewed me. Miss Gunn interviewed me, and Miss Gunn was a British lady, and I really didn't understand her accent. [Laughs] When she was busy interviewing me half the stuff I couldn't hear, I was just assuming that she was saying this. So I think it went well... My father knew the principal.

Was your father a teacher as well?

No, my father worked for the municipality, yes, in the municipality, the department of transport, he was a trainer. And my mother worked as a pharmaceutical assistant, in a pharmacy. So, when I came out for an interview, the principal spoke to me, I can't remember what she asked me, but she asked if I like the school, and I said of course, I was very excited. Because remember I came from a rural school, and in my Grade 1 we were actually schooling in a church, that was the only structure for us to go to school. In the other grades it was a proper school, but very small, a lot of kids, for the whole area. And then Mrs. Koza showed me the school and I was very excited. And after that there was nothing else that I could think about, except the school, imagining myself, going to the school,

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imagining myself spending the night at those dormitories, in those high bunk beds, right through November and December all I was thinking about was that school. But that January, I think, my grandfather passed away, and my grandfather was very influential in terms of our education... My grandfather used to say whenever I would see him, you guys must learn, you must go to school. So when my father told my grandfather that he had started taking me to a private school, my grandfather said, 'This is nice. You are going to do well, my girl. This is going to be the beginning of a good life for you.' And I thought to myself, thanks. For whatever reason my father came from a big family, and none of them achieved proper education, and their kids as well were not very much encouraged to learn, except the ones that stayed at my house, because my father was also taking responsibility. So my grandfather passed away in January. I know that I even went to school a bit late, because school started in mid-January, but I only went to school a week later because my grandfather had passed away. So I went to school. My first few weeks were a bit strange. The older girls were a bit funny, as usual [laughs]. Eh, but despite everything else, I just liked the school. So I did my Grade 8, it was Standard 6 at the time, and my class teacher was Miss Mqwebu, who was also my English teacher, an elderly lady. And my worry at the time was, it did look like most of the people in the school were from very affluent backgrounds. That actually shouted very loud. And most of the time I would be very scared, because I wasn't really from an affluent background as compared to them. I was from an affluent background as compared to where I came from, and if you're comparing the families in the rural area where I came from, but coming to the school I did realize that I was from a rural area. So that did give me a bit of a shake-up, but all I knew was that I was going to do my best. So in Standard Six I did very well, mmm, I know that the very first exams I did, I was in the first three places, the top three at the very highest levels... I realized that the other girls were not as clever as I was, that I did pick up. But I told myself I've got to work hard, whatever the case is. And there were two other girls in the whole grade... that was Lungile Shoba and Nomazizi Mdi, those were the two girls who I realized I could not really beat them, I had to work hard to beat them. So most of the time, especially the language tests, we were taught by the same teachers, I know that the teachers were comparing us, so if the test paper comes, I have to find out what they got. So I learned through that, there was a very good culture which helped most of us a lot, that was the language rule. We had to speak English from Monday through Friday and could only use the vernacular over the weekend.

Did people abide by that very strictly?

Yes. And if you were caught speaking the vernacular you would be punished...

So how were you punished?

Ah, we would work out front.

In the garden?

Yes, in the garden... or maybe clean some other space, to do some laundry, wash the dishes. So that language thing, I think it really helped a lot, for the future... Most of the people in the rural area, they had never even been to school, in the neighborhood. Every time the school closed and I'd go home, I'd always feel like, you know what? I'm blessed. I'm really blessed. Because you could see that some of the people, their lives would never get anywhere, but you'd always come

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back, and be one of them, and get out and go back to the academic, to the professional world. So, obviously, the years went by. There were lots of sporting events, we would do tennis, I liked running. We started getting conscious about our weights, we started getting up at half past four to go and run at the tennis courts, to lose some weights, we would run around the tennis courts ten times every morning. And this was all not allowed, hey? We would sneak out to go to the tennis courts, but also what used to happen, if there were tests, we would wake up at the same time and work for class... Most of the time it was myself and Nomazizi, Lungile not much, she liked to sleep, but myself and Nomazizi... And then, if there was a test or anything, obviously we would just polish up, on whatever you think you need to read over, if there was homework that you didn't finish. The bell would ring at five, and then by six, we would get ready for breakfast, and at seven, we would get ready to go to the chapel. So between half past four and half past five we would have a chance to do school work... And, funny enough, I wake up now at half past four to go to the gym, and then I'm at the gym at five, even if I'm tired, I still wake up, to do something around the house. So, any other direct questions that you want to ask me?

Do you have any other recollections about teachers you had there? What seemed important about the curriculum at Inanda as opposed to that of other schools?

For me, the main thing that has worked was the size of classes. They were kept small, you would get individual attention, but there was enough ground to compete. For me, that shouted very loud to me that this is the ground to compete, this is the ground to stretch yourself... And then also, I know that at the time, there was a choice between doing science, commercial, and general... I was a science student, but I got lazy and ended up doing commercial. But you know what, when the principal discovered I was doing commercial, she was hysterical... I started out in science and did very well, but in grades eleven and twelve, I just thought, all those maths, with me, eh, no... I moved to the commercial. I think all my friends did commercial too. Mrs. Koza was hysterical: 'Who told her she must go commercial?' And when I look at it, the people who went science, some of them are medical doctors now, and I would have done that, eh... But I think, later what I did, I actually helped my sister to be a medical doctor, my younger sister is a medical doctor now. I think my father as well, I think his dream was that I be a medical doctor, but with my commercial degree it helped me work in business, so everything happens for a reason.

Did your sister go to Inanda as well?

When my sister was due to go to high school, it was a time when you could go to white schools, so my father [send her elsewhere]... But she also went to a girls' school. She went to Northlands Girls' School, in Durban North. So... I'm thinking in terms of curriculum, I'm involved now with Glenwood Boys', I'm involved there for the past eight years, we have launched a science center, and it is very exciting to see the exposure the kids get there... So, if Inanda Seminary wanted to invest in building something like that for themselves, that would be also good.

Definitely. Do you have children at Glenwood Boys?

I had a boy, but he was not there for long, because he passed away [Jackson Ndlela passed away at the end of 2000], he was there in 1999. He got cancer in the leg-- so that's how I came to get involved with the school... Every year, I sponsor a child, a previously disadvantaged child, and I

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also contribute... I feel like every time I come to the school, knowing exactly what's going on in the townships, I feel like we're living in two worlds, are you guys able to approach a school, even if it's a primary school? Get them once a week to come to school here, and the matrics can teach them English or something? ... So we do sponsor them, pay for the kombis, and give them a bit of lunch, when they get to school... The boys teach them, basic English words...

So another broad question about Inanda—the political climate there in the early 1980s, what was that like? The influence of Black Consciousness on the students?

A lot of it, hey? Yes, most girls came from those families that were very much affected. In fact, one student there, her uncle was in jail. There was a girl from East London whose mother was sister to Steve Biko, and there were a couple of others who were there, so... the cousins, the mothers, were very much involved. So, when we were there, the nice thing was that the white people that were there were not necessarily from South Africa. So they were very much open-minded. And there was a lot of teaching that we got from them, a lot of respect that we started getting from white people, at that age. Because remember, growing up in South Africa, going through schools with the discrimination that was there... So, with us, getting that first hand, connecting with those people from other countries...

Did you have a lot of American teachers at that time?

Yes, it was mainly American teachers. And they were very much like normal people, they treated us like normal people. Although, I must say, it was very much discouraged for us to sit and discuss all these things... I think it was realized that it was not going to take us anywhere in that climate; in the South African climate of the time, we would end up rotting in jail. But, there were a couple of times when students from outside, like students from KwaMashu, threatened to take us out of the school. I remember in 1980, when there was, hmm—a lot happened in 1980. There was killings of students. It was 1976, 1980, 1986... So, in 1980, a couple of times, we were threatened, that we were going to be taken from the school, to go to the street, to march, in solidarity with what was happening outside. A couple of times we closed school, to go home. Ohlange High School was very effected, especially KwaMashu, KwaMashu was very much effected, because it was one of the oldest townships in Durban, it was very much effected. So a couple of times we had to close school. And the other nice thing that used to happen, in terms of our political education—we would get, every Sunday, a priest from outside to come and do the preaching. And most of these priests that used to come, they would talk about these things, what was happening outside. The real political climate that was happening outside.

They would talk about it.

Yes, they would talk about it. In most of their sermons they would mention it. That actually did help us too, instead of going home [without knowing what was going on]. We used to go home three, four times of year. So you go there [to the sermons] and think, oh God, is this what is happening? And then you'd go home and hear that so-and-so is in jail, was taken away, and you come back [to school], you forget, you move on, with your lessons. But the preachers that would come, they would tell us about these things, and they would give us a clear indication. The daily newspapers that used to come to the libraries, as well, used to keep us in touch with what was going

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on outside. And that created a lot of consciousness in us. Because you must remember, with where we are coming from, as communities, we're coming from very poor backgrounds, poor neighborhoods. To be in private school, being taught by white ladies, you see what I'm saying? You do tend to think that you're different, but, once you go back home, then reality hits. You realize, this is who I am, this is where I come from. So, I'm thinking that did strike up a very good balance in us as well, it did strike a very good balance, because we realized, what is it to live a real life, and you realize, what is it to live in the 1980s with the political climate that was so bad. And it taught us the lesson of appreciating both worlds, we grew up appreciating both worlds. I'm thinking, from who we are, not even one Inanda Seminary girl you will find not knowing the better things in life, and not knowing the *worse* things in life. Because our lives were very much balanced in that sense.

That's a good point—that's what I would suspect, from what I've seen. After you left Inanda, did you go directly to university?

Here, at University of Natal.

At University of Natal. What did you study there, did you study commerce?

Mmm, I did social science but mainly in commercial subjects. My major subjects were mainly political economy of South Africa, which was *very* interesting at that time, and I also majored in marketing, which was very related, in terms of our products, as South Africans, how do our products fit into society?

And with international boycotts that must have been very interesting. So you were at Howard College here?
Howard College, yes.

And to what extent was Howard integrated then? Were you one of the earlier black students there?

Yes, we were the first, second group... no, the second group was in 1985. In 1985, a lot of people were expelled from the black universities because of the riots, and it was the first time the University of Natal opened the doors for the black students. So when I got there, there were lots of students from other universities, and that was even more interesting, in terms of our political education. Very interesting for us, because it was the peak of our political unrest. I just have one picture in my mind, that Booysen, who was the rector at the moment, had to fly in a helicopter with the South African Defense Force to ask us to stop rioting, to stop marching. And I'd never seen Booysen before, but that day I saw him, in the helicopter, asking us to stop. It was mainly the black students and a couple of liberal white students that were there.

And you participated in that.

Definitely. And in those first few years, which was '85 up until '88, I think, the black students were not allowed to stay in the white residence area. They were not allowed. So all the students who were black students would stay at Alan Taylor, which is now Engen Offices, Tara Road, Wentworth [coloured township to the south of Durban], which was previously the barracks, the soldiers' barracks, before. That was used as the black students' residence, or you would stay in a flat or something. So, I stayed at the Wentworth residence in my first year, and in my second year, I think

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mainly because—there were a few [black] students at the res now, still you would only find one black student.

That would be difficult, I'm sure.

Yes, it was. But I was actually top ten my second year, my third year I had a bursary...

So how do you feel that your experiences at Inanda prepared you for university?

Mmm, it did. But in fact, at the time, Inanda girls had no career guidance. But as I mentioned early on, my father was very ambitious. He started talking to me about education, about being a professional, at seven years. He would sit me down and say, this year you will be this age, and you will be doing this. I knew in 2000 that I would be thirty-four years old, because my father sat me down and told me at seven years. In the year 2000, you will be thirty four years, and you must have worked for these companies. When you are eighteen, you will be done with school, you will be going to university. He never used to talk about anything else except university. So I knew when I finished school that I had to go to university, and I knew that I was good in science, and in commercial subjects. So when I got to university, I knew that I was going to do commerce, a bit of commerce, a bit of that... At the university there used to be a place called Students... student something... you would apply for a bursary there, if you needed money for books they would give it to you. But from Inanda, you had developed. But in terms of channeling us into careers, there was nothing. But as for me, I'm thinking, there should be universities or teachers coming to Inanda once a year, that's what happening in private schools now. My son, who is turning nine, goes to private school... I have heard that in grade seven, they start doing that there. I'm thinking, Inanda Seminary is at that level.

You had two sons—do you have more children than that?

I've got a girl, she's turning five tomorrow, and then the boy is turning ten on 2 April.

So what did you do after varsity?

After varsity I started work at Standard Bank. I was recruited by Standard Bank in varsity, but my ideal company was Unilever... company cars, they seemed to be having lots of money... But I didn't stay at home, which was nice. Even today, you know in South Africa there is an organization called Unemployed Graduates? So, I was never part of that. I think my grounding in high school, university, made my life easier, in terms of being able to relate, to offer some skills. So I was at Standard Bank... I think at that time there were job reservations, and they were trying to mix [black students in through her training program]. But I realized when I got to the bank, you don't need to be a graduate, I could have done it with a matric. I was there from 1989 to 1991, 1991 I moved to Tongaat-Hulett in marketing... I don't think I liked it there [at Standard Bank]... I was at Tongaat-Hulett for less than a year, then I moved to an insurance company on a contract, then I moved back to banking, to NBS, now called Ned Bank, and that's when I met my husband, that was in 1993-1996... The winds of change were blowing... The movement of the graduates was great... I was the very first black person employed at the call center [at Ned Bank]. In my three years, I got involved in recruiting the staff in the call center, I got involved in training, I was very much involved in working with the HR department... At the time, I was the only black person...

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I was called upon to be involved in interviews for hiring new people in the call center... I traveled overseas to see how the call centers work in Birmingham, and I got back and realized that my career is really gelling, so I did very well. I was one of the earliest people to own a cell phone in South Africa... I bought my first flat, I bought my first property in 1994, in Moore Road, and, I did well, I met my target, we did our elections... That experience [at Ned Bank] created who I am today... [Now she is the Managing Director of Empilweni Management Solutions—recruiting firm. EMS runs Jackson Ndlela Scholarship Fund for students at Glenwood High.]

[Follow-up question; response received via email, 9 March 2009: Do you recall the names of any of the preachers who came from outside to Inanda Seminary and spoke of political issues during your time there?

The priests that used to come and were very VOCAL about the political situation of the time were Rev. Nyawo, Rev. Poswa the late and Rev. BK Dlodla.]