

Ndo Nyembezi.
Inanda student, 1975–1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 16 April 2009.

I'm really glad to interview you, because the only person who graduated after 1969 that I've interviewed is Thembi Msane...

You have no time for the young ones!

No, I actually would like to speak to more of the younger graduates, but for some reason it's been easier to find older people to talk to.

Really—had you told me—because last week, over Easter, let's see—it's just that ex-members become really good friends. You know, that formative age, and that environment where you're all stuck together for five years, and you know nothing about life, especially when it comes to boys. There was a whole bunch of us down in Ballito for the Easter, and there were even a lot of them that came after me, but I'm sure that I can find a few names for you... [Mentions Joy, the Inanda alumnae coordinator in Cape Town. She then asks me about how I came to this project, my visions for the dissertation.] ... I'm just looking at the impact of American culture, the impact of being at Inanda and the kind of women it produced, and the larger impact, because in politics, in government, in business, in sport, we are so well-represented, I mean the numbers out of this relatively small group... It produced stunning, stunning—the leadership qualities that I think that it produced were unknown in this country. Everyone thought we were arrogant, sassy, loudmouthed, know-it-alls, but we got places, and we got to do what we wanted to do, and we've been showing up first in so many different places. And my sister [Nonkululeko Nku Nyembezi-Heita] now, she's the CEO of ArcelorMittal, which is the largest steel producer in the world, but she's CEO for Africa, when they [the press] interviewed her she was still with Vodacom, which is the mobile phone company, she was the head of mergers and acquisitions there—it was telling, hey. Her interview centered around the impact of the school and Miss Gunn, who's Irish, had on her. I mean, it just takes one individual, and your life takes a different direction! She said had that not happened, and if she had not been at that school, she wouldn't have been there!

Was that Miss Garn or Miss Gunn?

Miss Gunn, G-u-n-n. And I mean, it was a stunning interview. When I read the interview I said, you know, I've never really thought about it specifically, but yeah. It determined who you became, to a very large extent. And more importantly, the kind of person you are.

So what years did you go to Inanda exactly?

1975 to 1980.

Can you tell me a bit about when and where you were born, and about your family background? I know that you have at least one other sister who attended Inanda.

Okay, let me save you the junk. I was at the school, my sister was there before me, our first cousins from Maritzburg—Professor Nyembezi's kids—were there too, so it was a family thing. Four of us were there at the same time... In fact, Prof. at the time was the chair of the board at Inanda. I still remember my sparkling reputation—I arranged the first-ever strike at Inanda. Not a good thing. It was fun!

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What was the strike about?

Mr. Maurice Lewis was our principal, and he really improved, as far as we were concerned, he really improved the social conditions—especially the food. And he also relaxed the discipline a lot, especially in terms of having permission from parents when you went into town. If you were a senior, you could just ask directly at school. That didn't happen before—your parents had to write, and specify a date, and so on.

Yes, it seems like it was always quite restrictive.

So your parents always knew where you were before. Daddy Lewis—we used to call him Daddy Lewis—he didn't let on—the school was going through a real financial crunch at the time, but we didn't know that. So when he got fired—and you know when you're kids, and nobody tells you the reasons, they just tell you he's going—we decided no, no, no. Nelson Mandela's eldest daughter was at that time in school—his eldest daughter from his first marriage—

What was her name?

Maki—M-a-k-i. She was just doing a secretarial course there—they had just opened the secretarial school. [Correction: she was actually referring to Rennie Mandela, Nelson Mandela's daughter-in-law, who was an older matric student housed with the secretarial students on account of her age.] And we had this discussion where we were just like, guys, are we just going to let him go like that when he's been so good to us? So we decided we were going to make placards—we brought placards to chapel and just hid them. We didn't tell any of the lower classes because we knew they would blab. As soon as chapel was about to start and after announcements, we just pulled out our placards, and we started marching, and chanting, it was such an event. We used to sing. Media coverage was phenomenal, because Inanda Seminary, you would just never expect. Now my father was a lawyer, he heard this in court, and came flying to the school. He arrived there, and he was like thunder. He comes to me... My father is just the most understanding person, but he said, you have to go in now. My mother's saying, you have to understand... you're the warm, loving fun one, what happened?... Needless to say, my uncle being the chairman of the board, I watched. He was the one who was really sweet about it. He said, now Ndo, here's what you do. Ring the bell and get everybody into chapel. At this stage I had to entertain people... It's just mayhem, it's day two, I think. I got everybody into chapel, and he addressed us, he explained why they had to do it, and the fact that he was taking money from education into the social bank, i.e. the good food which we were so fond of, which we could understand... Ooh, but my father was so upset with me! No allowance, no going home, no nothing...

That was in 1979.

That was 1979, yeah, what a disaster. So anyways, my father is a lawyer, my mom was—she used to teach nursing, then I don't know, I think my dad decided that my mom has to come work with him, 'cause his practice—in fact, I think roughly 50%, if not more, of the judges you'll find around the country went through my dad. There weren't many lawyers in those days, and he was one of the big law firms. In fact in the Constitutional Court virtually every black judge went

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through him.

What is his first name?

Aubrey Nyembezi—that is A-u-b-r-e-y. So—well, look, I was still young, I don't know how they came to know about Inanda—oh, no, no, no, I do, I do, I do. We are three at home—my brother was the eldest and then my sister was the second. My brother went to Dlangezwa. There were two—no, there were three schools that took guys that I think my parents considered for my brother: Ohlange, which was next to Inanda, and then Dlangezwa as well, and of course Amanzimtoti, Adams Mission, yeah. I guess Mariannahill for some reason wasn't in the running, I don't know why. But anyway, he first went there [Dlangezwa], and then they organized a strike. And theirs was serious, they needed a lawyer, so the parents got together and asked my dad to please come and represent the kids. And of course after they got out of court... they also got expelled.

And your brother is older than you?

Yeah, he is the eldest. And then from there he went to Ohlange to finish... To me Ohlange was the funky one, the ones with sass, they could sing and dance—they had more of the cultural values, the sporting activities... Inanda were the innocent, prissy ones, all cute, all totally naïve, thinking they know it all, the loud-mouthed went to Inanda. So I guess because my brother was there, my parents and my sister were interviewed to go to Inanda, so she went, and in my case I think it was a foregone conclusion that when my sister goes, I go. In hindsight, maybe it was good, but it was also—my sister was an Einstein.

When did she go to Inanda?

She was two years before me—1973. my sister has always been number one in class, wherever she was, I mean including Cal Tech, where she was valedictorian. Me, I just wanted to play. Not a good thing to put those people together in school, because she was number one, she was acing everything, and then you come in and they find you goofing around—what happened with you? Okay, things I was interested in—history, English, drama—I was acing all the time, but the rest I really couldn't be bothered with. I kind of just crawled through—physics I did kinda like—but I was like, I don't want to study! Then went I went to varsity I started really coming into my own because I wasn't under the shadow of my sister.

What do remember about the curriculum at Inanda—things that you did and didn't like?

Yeah—here's what I think. It had a lot to do with the teachers... I don't think I was ever fascinated with history at all. I think I can say without hesitation that Baba Duma made me love history.

Richard Duma.

Yes. What I've discovered is I'm not the only one. When I first met you, at that function, five to seven women from different fields said that they'd never forget him, because he made the subject come alive—it was just him. We were all so disappointed [that he wasn't at the school's anniversary celebrations] because we all just wanted to thank him.

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Khosi Mpanza mentioned him too, and she said that he was very politically aware.

He was amazing—and I don't know what he was doing that was different, but it just came alive. It was relevant... It was like watching a movie... So you wanted to go to the library and read up on the stuff, and verify it. Also, issues of researching, I think almost subliminally, he taught us to do that... You'd learn to think critically, so even when you read the paper you'd relate it to something [historical]. So ja, he I really liked. Mr. Askew was another... he never did teach English, and he was an English teacher. The only thing I have a memory of is him talking about serving in the RAF during the Second World War, but for some reason I remember him being a fantastic teacher—I think he used to kind of make it culturally relevant... so by the time you read something you understand how it was in the context of the government... He was British, he lived in Umshali, he had a farm, he belonged to the country club... My love for Shakespeare comes somewhere from him. He taught us to enjoy the language that Shakespeare used. I think Inanda girls are the only people who read Shakespeare for the pleasure and the lessons... I remember him playing with his false teeth a lot, walking around and telling us how he got promoted in the RAF... He brought England alive, whether it's Keats or Yates... you start having a composite picture. I still remember when I landed in London going to the places he had mentioned... So yeah, I had some great teachers. Some scared me witless and so I would do the work just out of sheer terror. Afrikaans was my least favorite subject... [she walked out of class one day] Linda [Mtshali] used to help me with Afrikaans, because she came from Aliwal North so that was kind of a first language for her...

Everyone was required to take Afrikaans.

Yes.

What was the political awareness of students like at that time, with the Soweto uprisings, etc.?

I think Soweto changed everything. I think—to put it into context—Inanda girls were more aware than most other kids their age... mainly because of the environment and the families we came from and the fact that that was the only school at the time that had in the library a newspaper daily... It inculcated in you an interest in current affairs... Richard Duma, if you were talking about a particular era or period, incident, he would relate it back to SA and what was happening. But whilst we were aware, we weren't involved. It was more 'out there.' Because actually, that sugar cane thing protected us, because the border was sugar cane... We weren't part of the community, we weren't part of the society, we lived in this high-faluting world of books and drama and debate, and the people we debated with and played with often weren't black schools.

So you debated against Kearsney High, Khosi was saying.

Yeah, and I was in the debating society... We were twilight kids. We're neither fish nor fowl... Our world was a high-faluting world. And the things we were interested in were about our day-to-day survival... '76 of course changed it completely. Because families—our families now—were directly in harm's way. So it just became a talking point, a rallying point, the only thing that—it focused the mind, let me put it that way... It was because our educational system was so unlike

Ndo Nyembezi.
Inanda student, 1975-1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 16 April 2009.

anything else in this country. You almost had to... throw it back to, what would it feel like if I had teachers who beat me up everyday? And how would it feel like to be made—because we weren't part of the world who said you have to be schooled in Afrikaans... It was a them-us thing, there was a fair amount of that I think. But as it progressed and people started dying, it stopped being them and us, and it became clearly black-white—except even then it was a demarcated white. Our teachers were our teachers were fine. The people we had a problem with even were more Afrikaans than just white. And the school was amazing, because the announcements in chapel in the morning started to include, as part of the agenda, an update on what was happening, the State of Emergency. Also, obviously, there were a lot of kids from Joburg, which is where the melting pot of this was, and I believe it was helpful for them to feel the school was supportive. And we all drew together and could draw strength from that. My brother at the time was at varsity, he had just started varsity. He was what, sixteen and a half when he went.

And where did he go to varsity?

He went to University of Zululand at that time. He wanted to study law, but my dad was dead-set against of his kids to study law... About May, July, his varsity shuts down because of the riots. This is now 1976... Then there was a blow-up at varsity, maybe October or November. And my brother... [was] in solitary confinement for over a year, and my dad was representing them, etc. They ended up with 20 charged and 358 state's witnesses... They were either going to be sentenced to death, life, or Robben Island. My dad was praying for ten years on Robben Island, then they come out, that kind of thing—that would have been the best scenario. And, [Ismail] Mohamed, who is now—he became the first non-white judge in South Africa—he was the state counsel that my dad put in there. He was phenomenal. The long and short was that he got the state to withdraw the case. It had never happened before, it created legal history... I remember the day that they came out, which was a Tuesday or Wednesday. I was at school obviously... 1979 they came out—no, 1978 they came out—anyway, I remember I had a massive asthma attack—when it was announced they came out, my asthma cleared. There was a spontaneous party on campus. Also, my brother used to date our friends, so there were all these ex-girlfriends and new girlfriends. And we were beating the drum! The support was just amazing. But yeah—that's how I remember the support at school. By the time they came to the sick-bed to tell me, there was this throng of people! And I thought, 'They are going to hang til they die.' Cause I couldn't work out the sound, the loudness! So that was nice.

Were there any sort of lack consciousness student groups or anything that were organized?

No, no. At that time people—I think at the time it was focused on individuals. So Mandela became the icon at the time, then it was Steve Biko. It turns out—and this is something about being naïve, about living in a bubble, is that there was far more involvement than one realized at the time. We thought we were just debating issues with these guys from the outside. Meanwhile, I guess that was what participation meant. We were more cerebral—we used our thinking skills and sassiness to open doors. I think that's truly the most impact that we made. And because we were so aware I think our involvement was more on the strategic side, on the thinking side, and we're good at corresponding, because when you're stuck on campus and only go out our times a

Ndo Nyembezi.
Inanda student, 1975–1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 16 April 2009.

year, the pen and paper—so we, my sister’s friends in New York became my friends. And remember, there were other dynamics. The guys kind of figured politics was their thing. The girls from Inanda didn’t understand that. They kind of figured, if you can do it, I can do it... So there were also those bits of tension, that the guys thought we were too forward. But in any debate you would find Inanda girls had better researched the material, had organized their presentation better. We were good story-tellers, because we didn’t have any entertainment. We had to amuse ourselves, which means you kind of become creative... So I think the guys sometimes were a bit weary of us.

That’s the perspective that a lot of older students have told me too. But I was curious about your generation, because I heard that there was one black consciousness group that had tried to form at Inanda... That would have died in an instant.

In 1976 or 1977—there was one article about it—

We weren’t feeling the heat. And we had so much freedom on campus—it could have built up the steam and momentum if we weren’t allowed [to talk about politics], but the point was it was actually encouraged. So we thought, what can we do? Let’s get educated—let’s get better educated and beat them at their own game, that kind of thing.

You participated in the debate team. Did you do any other extracurricular activities?

... I was involved in drama from the point that I arrived... and debating... oddly enough with my asthma, I was on the track team... If there’d been cheerleading I would have been doing it—I’ve always had that energy. And of course gymnastics. Oddly enough my sister, though she didn’t look like it, got into gymnastics before me... when you’re a younger child, you’re constantly playing catch-up with the older ones, and so you come away with almost a complex. So no sooner do I get to Inanda... every year, she gets the [awards in] history, the English, the maths, the physics, the chemistry. You know, she just cleans up... Wherever she was, I wanted to be... Drama, I then was the one who got right through, debate, history. It was fun. I also think it was good being at Inanda with my sister. That was one of the biggest revelations in my life. Growing up we were always fighting. Looking back now, my sister was always the tidy one, structured in her thinking—me, I’m the one who’s running outside, being chaotic and loud, wanting to play... We get to Inanda. My sister was the mother hen. You couldn’t look at her baby sister without her saying, what are you looking at?... She had this group of friends, where to this day they are still friends, and they sort of took over protection of me. And of course it sort of created—there were those who wanted to get closer to that naughty group of girls who were always in the top five of their class, so they would come and be sweet to me, and just always look out for me... The others just hated me because they thought I thought I was better than them... My sister would always wake up before me, take her shower, give me a little time to sleep, and then while I was showering she would make my bed, and then she takes me to class. I couldn’t believe it... We built a friendship that’s lasted.

So did you like attending a girls’ school?

Oh, I wouldn’t have it any other way. We were scared of boys. When my sister left for

Ndo Nyembezi.
Inanda student, 1975-1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 16 April 2009.

Waterford, I then was old enough, I was going into Form 4.

Your sister went to Waterford in Swaziland? When was that?

When she finished Inanda, with all distinctions, she went straight to Waterford, because Miss Gunn had said, this is what you have to do. So she had sat down with my sister and went through all the options, and they settled on electrical and electronic engineering... Anglo-American was just starting on... because 1976 had come, they put a little more thought into public relations... they set aside money for scholarships... So for this scholarship she needed to get her A-levels. So she went to Waterford and got her A-levels, then she went to Manchester in the UK and did her degree there, then she went to Cal Tech and did her masters there. Anyway, where was I going with this?

We were talking about attending a girls' school.

Oh, oh, oh. When my sister went to Waterford, that's when I realized what a coward I was. Until then, we were always bonded together by my parents, whenever there was a party we went together... Then when my sister was at Waterford, my brother had already gone to Germany, so this means there's just me. At that time I had started modeling, because I was thin, thin, thin. Until varsity I weighed 49 kilograms (107 pounds).

That's a small amount.

Yes. And my mom put me on a protein diet, I lost five kilograms—when I tell you I had energy, I was just bouncing off the ceiling... I was just born with it. So I thin! And doing a lot of modeling guys were after me obviously, but I just didn't understand boys. And I had it in my head—

This is when you were still in high school.

Yes, they used to let me go—my mom would come and collect me, I'd pack my bag and get on a plane, go to whatever assignment, and come back. It was quite neat. And that was the other thing about Inanda—they always encouraged this... And also the fact that you don't change... you had pictures in the paper but that had nothing to do with you... Because I was such a loud, noisy, energetic person, nobody could believe how scared I was of boys. So this one time, I think, my parents noticed I wasn't making any progress with my social life... so this time was a party of my family friends... now for a father of a sixteen-year-old to say, you are going, must tell you how desperate they were... First boy who asked me to dance I started crying. This went on for a whole year and a half.

Shame.

It was a disaster! When I was going to varsity my father sat me down and explained to me that it's time I stopped climbing trees now, I'm a grown-up girl. There would be boys there. And they would not want to play table-tennis or climb trees.

[Laughs]

There was naïvete, and then there was me. I was a joke even among my friends. I hadn't kissed a

Ndo Nyembezi.
Inanda student, 1975–1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 16 April 2009.

boy until I was sixteen... I didn't really have need for boys, and I didn't understand them. I understood them as a father, an uncle, a teacher, but that boy thing? I'm glad that my naïvete and my innocence lasted until I was twenty, when I had my first real boyfriend. I'm really had a childhood, is what I'm trying to say. And part of the reason I was protected so long is because I was at a girls' school—and not just any girls' school, but Inanda Seminary... You focus on things that are real to you, that are meaningful, that add value to your life... Your value system goes way beyond thinking about what other people think... But someone said to me that because I missed my teenaged years I lived them in my thirties. I was terrible, sheesh! I was thinking to myself, slow down! But I mean, I took my time. And that's why, if I had children, I would send them there. But I'm looking at my niece—she's going to St. Stithian's [Girls College, Methodist, predominantly white] in Joburg. My sister's managed to inculcate a very similar experience for her... She is fourteen, and she still cares nothing about boys. The friends that she has, they've been friends for three, four years, and they're all the same... If Inanda had been up to scratch at the time, my sister definitely would have sent her daughter there. But Inanda has to compete in an open market...

You were in one of the last generations who didn't have historically white private schools open to them.
Yes. So the private schools—it was really heartening to see what I saw when we went [to Inanda]. The sense of self... Inanda lost that in the 1980s, 1990s, but now...

It's a very encouraging place right now, and an interesting time to be doing this research. What has been done about the school was done in the mid-1990s...

Yes, it's perfect timing, and I'm sure you've talked to Baba Zondi.

Yes, and I talked to his wife, too...

Oh, let me tell you. I was in the choir...

So what did you do after attending Inanda?

I was at UCT. And, in those days, you couldn't, as a black person, walk into UCT.

Yeah, that was 1981?

1980.

1980.

No, 1981, sorry, I get confused.

So that was very early.

It was, because my father's legal practice—the leaders of the progressive parties in those days, the Helen Suzmans, etc. whenever there was a problem that required discussion, my dad would be obviously one of the leaders that they called... My dad called Colin Engel [?], who was an MP then, and Colin went about telling my dad how to go about it so that I actually get in, because by then the state thought they were being very kind. If you wanted a course that was not being offered by a black university and you had good grades, they would say, okay, fine. So I was

Ndo Nyembezi.
Inanda student, 1975-1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 16 April 2009.

attracted to do speech and drama, but University of Zululand then offered it. So what I was asked to do was actually—take the UCT one [prospectus], the Wits University one, the Natal University one, and Unisa, and compared them, and I highlighted all of the things that weren't at the University of Zululand, because of course it was a bush university and wasn't that great. And I highlighted all of the things that they don't have and that's what I was to major in. So, obviously first I had to audition. UCT, I auditioned. Wits, I made such a fool of myself—there's a poem by Alan Paton about the Diepkloof Reformatory, beautiful, and that's the one I did. And I did it for all, Wits was my last audition, and Wits was the scariest, because it was in the Great Hall... for a panel of 18... One lecturer said, 'Are you aware that the poem you just did is banned in this country?'

And no one else said anything.

UCT I got it, Natal I got it, and Wits I was disqualified. But that's okay because I had a great time at UCT. And it turns out that in Africa, UCT drama school is the best... But then I left drama school, it was just to get in. That was the only time I had to present myself in Parliament...

How many other black students were there?

We couldn't have been more than eighty, out of a school of 10,000—you could count us on one hand. And of course there was the issue of accommodation, because you couldn't live on campus. But UCT really did try, they did more than most I think. Wits had a longer history of having blacks because of the medical school, and they had a res that was vibrant, on the border of Soweto... UCT didn't really have anything because they really hadn't taken many of us. But you see, Cape Town wasn't really meant for blacks, it was a coloured area... I was one of two people at drama school who were black, there wasn't even a coloured person... but you know, when you come in, and your focus isn't on the negatives, if you don't see them, they just don't exist, they don't push your buttons. I was just so excited to be on my own, at drama school, learning to smoke, you know, I had a blast, I had friends, we used to hang out, I was being introduced to a world I had never been exposed to, and people would say, ah, you should worry about the disparaging racism. Should I? I started learning later on. Darkies said I wasn't black enough. Oh, dear Lord. What does that mean? But it was just a case of keeping an open mind... I wasn't there to change anybody, I was just there to, I guess, grow up, and I did. I was just learning that when you say gay, in drama school especially, you don't mean happy... There was a guy who came from Waterford, David, who had been my sister's friend at Waterford, so he sort of played the big brother and looked out for me. He said, 'Hhayi wena.' Because his parents had been in the Transkei, and you know when you grow up on a farm you grow up speaking the language with your little picaninny friends, so he spoke fluent Xhosa... [He explained what gay meant.] I have to admit, I didn't feel discriminated against... The only times I realized I was really, really black in Cape Town was when I was off campus. On campus I was really, really protected... I never really had friends from the township because it was two worlds, actually three, white, black, and coloured, in Cape Town... You go to the theatre, you go out for coffee, not even one [other black person]... I think in my first year, there were maybe four or five black kids who came from Cape Town, the rest were all Durban and Joburg... I learned how to drink wine... I made a lot of male friends who would protect me, because I think they realized, she's not just

Ndo Nyembezi.
Inanda student, 1975-1980.
Interviewed in Durban, 16 April 2009.

physically a virgin, she's a virgin in her brain too, and we need to protect her. So I had all these buddies, and I think what they liked—and a lot of them were Jewish—'we were the ones close to the model, who would be close to the model,' and the other guys would be thinking, 'Damn, I want to hang out with them'...

So you graduated in 1985?

Yes, and then when I was finished I had no idea what I was actually going to do. I came home in December...

[Went to Johannesburg, spent time with her uncle who worked in advertising, works for Market Research Africa. Gets into marketing with Independent Newspapers Group; works for SABC on children's television programs. Spent some time in the UK training on TV production; later works for Coca Cola, World Space satellites, now working on a conversation board game.]