

# HELEN McCUE

(b. 10 April 1949) Australian  
Educator, Nurse, Refugee Advocate and Researcher

**Visiting Durban (16 - 19 September 2009) en route to receiving  
the Elijah Barayi Award at the Cosatu Conference**



*Helen McCue (centre) with Phyllis (right) and Jackie (Left)*

## **BELOW - FROM AN EMAIL INVITE TO ATTEND A TALK BY HELEN DURING HER BRIEF STAY WITH ME IN DURBAN:**

The CCS (UKZN) and SMI-KZN cordially invites you to a seminar / discussion with Helen McCue (Australian Community Activist and Author).

Topic : **Grassroots Mobilising within Refugee Communities:  
Perspectives on Palestine and Australia**  
Date : 18 September 2008, Friday  
Time : 10am - 12pm  
Venue : CCS Seminar Room - F208, Howard College, UKZN

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Helen McCue is best known as a co-founder of Rural Australians for Refugees (2001). A trained nurse educator she worked with the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the Middle East in 1981, was then seconded to the United Nations Relief and Works Organisation (UNRWA) in Lebanon, and subsequently worked as a volunteer in refugee camps in Beirut 1982-83. In 1984 she co-founded the trade union aid body Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA), and was its first Executive Director and regional adviser in South Africa and the Middle East until early 1994. She founded the Women Refugee Education Network (1996) and the Wingecarribee Community Foundation (2001), and was involved in the establishment of Wingecarribee Reconciliation Group (1997).

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Helen has been with us in the struggle for many years. I recall meeting her in Lusaka working with the ANC and SACTU. Living with me in Harare, Zimbabwe! She returned with us from exile and lived in Braamfontein and when in Durban lived with me in Durban.

Helen probably told me her work was part of the solidarity work with Apheda and the ANC/SACTU, later COSATU. Some of this work still continues to the present. We lived with the premise in the struggle period, 'know only what you need to know' and of course memory at 82 years is not predictable.

### **In answer to questions about APHEDA, Helen sent the following.**

I am staggered by the depth of her involvement in our struggle and the depth of her skills she brought and also the magnitude of her commitment. She was involved in so many aspects of our life that we were not aware of. And yes, she deserved that most prestigious award named after Elijah, the first president of Cosatu.



Elijah Barawi

**Here it is (next page):**

## **APHEDA: 20 Years of Working for Freedom**

The story of how, through Union Aid Abroad—APHEDA, Australian trade unionists have made a strategic contribution to the achievement of non-racist non-sexist democracy and development in South Africa and to fighting poverty and HIV across southern Africa.

### **Programs in Southern Africa, 1985-2004**

Soon after APHEDA was formed by the ACTU as the overseas humanitarian aid agency of the Australian trade union movement in 1984, Helen McCue co-founder and Executive Officer held meetings with Eddie Funde, the ANC representative based in the Sydney Trades Hall, about how to get assistance for those struggling against apartheid, in particular those refugees in Zambia and Tanzania associated with the liberation movements. APHEDA focussed initially on refugees and national liberation movements; its first training programs were with the Eritreans, nurses from the Palestinian refugee camps, and the ANC.

Not long after the discussions with Eddie, Helen McCue made her first trip to Lusaka where she met with the exiled ANC leadership, in particular President Oliver Tambo and Treasurer-General Thomas Nkobi. With Nkobi, known affectionately as "TG", Helen mapped out a strategy for a program of support to the ANC.

### **Programs in exile in the frontline states, 1985-1990**

From 1984 to 1990 during this period of exile, Helen visited Lusaka in Zambia and Harare in Zimbabwe and Mazimbu in Tanzania at least twice or three times a year, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating APHEDA's program of leadership training support to the ANC. APHEDA placed several technical experts, ESL, Donna Burns being one of these (in 1987, with AEU support), at the **Solomon Mhlangu Freedom College**, known as SOMAFSCO, at Mazimbu in Tanzania. She was followed by Ailsa Purdon in 1989. Here we worked closely with Muhammad Tickly implementing an extensive program of technical and vocational support. APHEDA provided computer training for the ANC's Department of Education, Finance and Culture in Lusaka and extensive **administrative and management training** for many of the ANC's departments, including Women, Sports, Media and Finance. Scholarships for training in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania were offered to ANC staff in technical areas such as electrical, printing and librarianship.

APHEDA also provided support to the SA trade union movement through SACTU (South African Council of Trade Unions) and later worked with **COSATU** inside South Africa. Kay Moonsamy and others became firm friends. ACOA and MOA (now CPSU and ASU) supported management and administrative training for SACTU staff in 1986-8. The South Australian PSA and MUA supported occupational health and safety training with SACTU/COSATU from 1988. APHEDA also worked with the South African Olympic movement in exile, meeting and working closely with Sam Ramsamy and Steve Tshwete, who became Sports Minister in the first democratically elected government.

### **Advocacy, training and visits to Australia**

In addition to development assistance, APHEDA and Helen McCue as Secretary to the **Australian ANC Support Committee**, supported the ANC which was the dominant voice of the anti-apartheid movement in Australia during those years to 1990. We provided considerable administrative support to the committee's various activities such as the sports, cultural, travel and consumer boycotts, and the visits to Australia of the ANC's Foreign Affairs Minister Johnny Makatini, President Oliver Tambo, Thabo Mbeki, Gertrude Shope and, on his release from prison in 1990, Nelson Mandela.

The Australian ANC Support Committee also brought to Australia the famed Amandla cultural group. As part of APHEDA's advocacy work we also supported a number of speaking tours by various members of the ANC leadership. A particularly noteworthy one was in April 1989 with TG and Steve Tshwete. The major purpose was to raise funds for the ANC's various primary and secondary schools, and technical and vocational training projects. There was also a series of meetings for Steve Tshwete with key sports bodies, in particular the Australian Rugby Union which was about to send a team to South Africa breaking the international sports boycott. We met with ARU President Jo French and Steve gave an impassioned speech about the need to maintain the boycott. It was an extraordinary meeting leaving Jo with tears in his eyes. Soon after this Jo made a phone call to the South African Rugby Union cancelling the tour.

In Australia APHEDA provided scholarships for **media training** for staff of the ANC in exile, and with the support of the ABC Staff Association, trained a number of people who later worked for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, now chaired by Eddie Funde. Barto La

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Guma and Peige Boikanyo came for TV editing training in 1986, and Victor Moche for 4 months of training in film production techniques. Sual Pelle came for a longer training period in mid-1989. APHEDA also provided scholarships in project office and educational management and administration and **community arts** in Australia: Lux Motau came in mid-1989. It was an extensive program of leadership training in preparation for the new democratic non-racist, non-sexist South Africa that everyone hoped and worked for. Like Eddie, many of these people now hold leadership positions in the South African government departments.

### **Programs in South Africa during the fight for democracy 1990-1994**

After Nelson Mandela's release in February 1990 and the unbanning of the liberation movements, APHEDA was able to establish an office in Johannesburg (located with the Institute for Contextual Theology in Braamfontein) and provided considerable support to the ANC during the transition period.

In March 1990 prior to going to South Africa, Helen suggested to TG that the Australian Government, and in particular Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, would be keen to make a significant gesture of support to Mandela at the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Helen recommended the ANC ask for \$20m of development assistance to support the transition to democracy. Eddie Funde, Mohammad Tickly, TG and Helen sat down in Lusaka and framed a development request. To TG's amazement the Australian Government agreed to this proposal and Gareth Evans was able to make this announcement to Mandela when he first met him.

Gareth Evans was able to visit South Africa in 1993, and staged a memorable visit to APHEDA's projects in **Soshanguve**, near Pretoria, where a sharp altercation with SA security gained headlines. In that township, in association with the Catholic church, community organisations and later the Soshanguve Residents' Trust, APHEDA supported a range of youth leadership, women's cooperatives, and local government training programs to 1996.

Planned with Sam Ramsamy, Steve Tshwete and Bill Jardine in Lusaka in 1989 was a program begun inside South Africa in 1990, with the anti-apartheid **National Sports Congress**, supporting sports training for young women and men in townships across South Africa designed to lead to the integration of the SA sports bodies, such as the National

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Olympic Committee of South Africa. This included the staging of the first large non-racial youth sport carnivals.

As soon as it was possible in 1990 the Australian government decided to grant through APHEDA a sum of almost \$4m for the **repatriation** of the South Africans from the liberation movements who were in exile. This involved costs of travel and resettlement. The **Batlagae Trust** was established to give thousands of primary, high school, college and university students from exile in the frontline states scholarships to integrate into the South African education system. Many found this process difficult, particularly those who did not speak local languages, and who had lost parents during the struggle. The Trust also assisted the establishment of a model non-racial community school in Yeoville in downtown Johannesburg, with specialist learning services to cater for the particular needs of the primary students coming from exile.

In 1991-92 APHEDA supported the **Association of Ex-Political Prisoners**, with members from different liberation movements, in work skills training: brick-making in Natal and poultry, pig and vegetable farming skills in the Transkei.

The friendship between **Australian unions** and COSATU has been growing since the new union movement burst onto the scene in Durban in 1973. In 1991 COSATU requested support for its adult education and skills grading work, and Adrienne Bird, from the metalworkers union, NUMSA, visited Australia to learn about skills grading systems. She subsequently became head of the SA National Training Board. Australian unionists Alistair Machin (COSATU), Chris Lloyd (COSATU and NUMSA) and Kate McLearn (textiles and clothing, SACTWU) went to SA to provide technical advice to the unions on these issues.

The total cash value of these APHEDA programs up to 1994 was around \$9m from Australian government, unions and other donors.

### **Programs in South Africa for post-apartheid reconstruction 1994-2004**

The Government of National Unity elected on 28 April 1994, led by President Nelson Mandela was mandated to carry out a Reconstruction and Development Program to provide jobs, houses, clean water, education, electricity, communications and primary health care to the majority of the SA population living in poverty. That struggle for a transformation from the apartheid economy and an unfree society to a

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more equal and democratic society has not yet been won, but international aid was promised to assist that transition. The promised aid didn't always materialise, sometimes it was used up in providing warring foreign advisers to the new democratic government, and unions and community-based organisations lost leaders to government and to the corporate world.

Starting before the first democratic elections were agreed to in late 1993, was a series of projects with the Johannesburg-based Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, established by the eminent anti-apartheid journalists Allister Sparks and Hugh Lewin.

The aim was to build skills for the **democratisation of the media**, which had been disproportionately government-controlled in South Africa, and which needed to train and include large numbers of professionals from non-privileged backgrounds. When the democratic movement nominated a diverse group of leaders to the board of the SABC, to help drive the democratisation process of the state media, APHEDA and IAJ supported a preparatory seminar. There were programs in journalistic English for journalists from communities where English was not the home language. It was not simply journalists who benefited from these programs; in order to develop a culture of free media, IAJ ran programs helping school students to develop school newspapers discussing local issues and the transition to non-racial democracy. IAJ trained people elected or assigned as media officers and spokespeople from the union and organisations in the democratic movement. These programs were run in association with the ANC Department of Information and Publicity. Two Australians, Sharon Davis and Geoff Parish from ABC began training at IAJ in broadcast journalism/radio and community television skills from March 1995.

**The SA Reconstruction Development and Education Trust** was set up in 1994 by Eddie Funde, with support from Walter Sisulu and managed by Ernest Kgaile until his death in 1999. This channelled donations from South Africans in Australia with funds in SA towards a range of development projects, in President Mandela's home town of Qunu in the Transkei, and in Soweto.

Due to a high rate of gender violence in workplaces, COSATU asked APHEDA to support the **Sexual Harassment Education Project**, initially based at the Centre for Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg for two years from mid-1995. SHEP worked with



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COSATU unions on policy development, advocacy, and education to prevent violence and sexual harassment in workplaces, using over \$200,000 from Australia's Women in Development fund and Australian trade unions (such as CPSU). SHEP was also supported by the Canadian Auto Workers.

From 1995-99 APHEDA was proud to support a struggling organisation based in Umlazi township south of Durban, the Natal Workers History Project which recorded the stories of local labour and township activists and created **literacy** texts in isiZulu and English for local women and men to learn how to read and write.

### **HIV**

As Nelson Mandela has many times affirmed, HIV is the major challenge facing South Africa and its youth today, killing more people than apartheid and its wars. When APHEDA began work inside SA in 1990, less than 1% of the adult population tested positive to HIV. Now in the eastern provinces between a fifth and a third of women giving birth are HIV positive. This new burden of illness and grief is having a vast impact on all communities in southern Africa, and threatens the social and economic development needed to overcome the poverty to which apartheid consigned millions. HIV requires SA transform primary health care, laws, education, industrial rules and gender relations.

In 1991 APHEDA had worked with **COSATU** in staging the unions' first policy conference on AIDS, within an overall program of occupational health and safety training. In 2001 APHEDA began a two-year project with the HIV and campaigns officers of COSATU which produced a million copies of a booklet on HIV for COSATU members and 30,000 copies of a training manual for shop stewards. COSATU developed policy on HIV and discrimination and on treatments, and was a leader in the mass Treatments Action Campaign which is fighting to antiretroviral treatments to the millions of South Africans with HIV who need them. Theo Steel, COSATU's national campaigns officer has been able to visit Australia twice, speaking about workplace AIDS programs and the international campaign by union, NGOs and churches against the western drug profiteers and for treatments access.

From 1994-2001 APHEDA supported a community-based AIDS initiative, which pioneered HIV education, home care, testing and support in the large impoverished township of the **Winterveld**, north



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west of Pretoria. This built on efforts by the non-government clinics since 1988. From 1998-2000 APHEDA also supported maternal/child health and child nutrition programs in the Winterveld. Between 1996-9 APHEDA also supported HIV youth education in a range of Gauteng and Mpumalanga townships through the Johannesburg-based Health Education, Training and Information Project.

Cooperation with autonomous fundraising groups in the Australian community, such as the **Boomerang Project**, to provide funds for **Rehoboth**, a developing foster care village for babies and toddlers with HIV in Murchison on the coast of kwaZulu-Natal, for the Nkosi Johnson Foundation, Educo youth leadership training, Pieter-Dirk Uys' education work based in Darling, and for HIV treatments.

The **Rural Womens Movement** arose in the early 1980s as a federation of local campaigning and income generating groups in 3,000 villages, representing largely illiterate landless mothers and grandmothers in areas of forced relocation by the apartheid regime. In 2001 APHEDA was funded by AusAID to support a capacity building program so that the five regions of RWM would be able to help their constituents respond to HIV. In the regions centring on Dennilton and Ermelo in Mpumalanga, Brits in NW province, and Estcort and Vryheid in kwaZulu-Natal, groups are doing outreach education, structured training courses on sexual health and sexual rights, providing home care and orphan support in impoverished rural communities.

APHEDA has transferred a total of over \$3m (about 13m Rand) to SA projects since 1994.

### **Programs in other southern African countries**

The ANC exiles were hosted for many years in Zambia, and TG asked APHEDA to support programs to benefit the Zambian hosts. In 1989 APHEDA began a five-year project with the **Zambian Department of Youth Development**, supporting Rural Youth Training Centres, such as in Mumbwa, which trained youth in carpentry, sewing, blacksmithing and other skills (as well as culture and health issues such as HIV) to prevent a drift to unemployment in the cities.

Beginning in 2001 is a project with the **Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions** training union officers and delegates from all affiliates in all regions of the country in how best to respond to HIV, though prevention education of workers and their partners, through peer support for workers with HIV, policy development, and a drop-in

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centre on health and HIV in the Western Region office of ZCTU in Bulawayo. This project was coordinated by Mrs Clementine Dehwe until her appointment as head of the HIV program at the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in Brussels in January 2004. The program is continuing, despite the social, political and economic chaos engendered by the Mugabe dictatorship, and sometimes-severe repression of the trade unions.

### **Future**

Until 2004, APHEDA was able to win substantial funding from AusAID, the aid agency of the Australian government, for its development projects in SA and Zimbabwe. The introduction of a new funding system unfortunately precludes APHEDA and many similar non-government agencies, gaining such funding in coming years. But development problems, poverty and HIV in southern Africa grow worse each day. Union Aid Abroad will continue community and trade union projects in southern Africa with donated funds, and will prioritise the international campaign for HIV treatments until workers and their families with HIV in southern Africa access the support they need to survive.

### **Remembering those who made great contributions to these efforts and are no longer with us:**

- Walter Sisulu
- Treasurer-General Thomas Nkobi
- Steve Tshwete
- Bill Jardine
- Ernest Kgaile
- Cliff Dolan
- Donna Burns
- Eugene Hendricks
- Tas Bull

### **Statements of support to APHEDA:**

In 1994, at APHEDA's tenth anniversary, **Nelson Mandela** wrote:

*On behalf of the African National Congress we would like to express our deep appreciation for your efforts, both past, present and we are sure in the future. Thousands of people have benefited from more than 40 health, education and development projects conducted by*

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*APHEDA since 1984, and for this we are truly in your debt.... We thank you and the people of Australia, and will be eternally grateful for your magnificent contribution.*

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary in 1994, **Allister Sparks**, as Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism wrote:

*We at the IAJ drink a toast tonight to APHEDA on your 10th birthday -- a decade of great work in helping to democratise this oppressed land with whom we share a hemisphere. The programs you have helped us run have not only been vital in opening up the South African media and strengthening its human rights role: they have also established close ties between media people in our two countries which is already leading to a special relationship between Australia and the new, non-racial South Africa. The remarkable work you have done in our country has been largely due to the imagination, energy and personal commitment of Helen McCue, whom we salute as a much loved-friend as she takes her leave from APHEDA. Viva Helen and Viva APHEDA!*

From **Father Smangaliso Mkhathswa**, Executive Mayor of the City of Tshwane January 2004:

*It is only in hindsight that we can fully appreciate the selfless contribution that was made by the individuals and solidarity organisations to the ultimate triumph of the South African revolution. The mere missing of faces, jokes, words of encouragement and ducking from the physical dangers has now been superceded by the realisation that our revolutionary agenda was much bigger than anyone of us could have realised when we shouted "Down with apartheid and forward with democracy and freedom".*

*...it is a new revolution that not all the developing countries want to subscribe to. The solidarity groups and individuals who helped us to smash apartheid cannot now fold their arms and hope that the apartheid backlogs will simply go away.*

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Subsequently in reply to my questions, Helen sent the following:

"I came to work. I came to South Africa in March 1990 and opened the office in Braamfontein in November 1990. I lived in SA for four years

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and in total I have been with you for 25 years (1/4 century) just under half of my life! Thank you for all your caring also.”

In reply to a question about her speech on receiving the award, she said: “I congratulated COSATU on its milestone 10<sup>th</sup> Congress and its magnificent achievements over the past twenty five years. I extended solidarity greetings from the ACTU and workers of Australia and also congratulated COSATU for their leadership in the international Boycott Disinvestment and sanctions against Israel.

**“The address emphasised the fact that the international community looked to South Africa and worker’s movement for leadership in this campaign and in the fight for Palestinian liberation and drew the parallel between their own experience of apartheid and the suffering of Palestinians under an apartheid Israel.**

“I ended by expressing my sincere thanks for this extraordinary recognition of the Australian trade union movement and Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA.”

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For more information on our comrade in solidarity, the following brief summary would be useful:

### **BRIEF SUMMARY OF HELEN McCUE**

(Sources used to compile this entry:

Helen McCue interviewed by Ann-Mari Jordens, ORAL TRC 5770;  
National Library of Australia, Oral History & Folklore Section)

Helen McCue is best known as a co-founder of Rural Australians for Refugees (2001). A trained nurse educator she worked with the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the Middle East in 1981, was then seconded to the United Nations Relief and Works Organisation (UNRWA) in Lebanon, and subsequently worked as a volunteer in refugee camps in Beirut 1982-83. In 1984 she co-founded the trade union aid body Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA), and was its first Executive Director and regional adviser in South Africa and the Middle East until early 1994. She founded the Women Refugee Education Network (1996) and the the Wingecarribee Community Foundation (2001), and was

involved in the establishment of Wingecarribee Reconciliation Group (1997).

### **Details**

The daughter of Phyllis neé O'Connor, a typist in the public service, and John Burns, a hairdresser, Helen's family had strong links with the Canberra community. Her maternal grandfather was a bricklayer on old Parliament House, and her paternal grandfather, a linotype operator for the Canberra Times, established the printers' union in Canberra. She has two siblings. Educated at local Catholic schools she became a nurse and trade union representative at Canberra Hospital. She married Kevin McCue in 1970 (divorced.1979) and travelled with him to London where she obtained further qualifications in nursing. On her return to Australia she completed a diploma in teaching and a degree in nursing education in Adelaide in 1979. She visited China in 1977 and 1978.

After completing a Masters in Health Personnel Education at the University of NSW in 1981, McCue worked with the World Health Organisation in the Middle East in 1981-82, evaluating nursing services for the United Nations. She was then seconded to the United Nations Relief and Works Organisation (UNWRA) in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. Following the Sabra-Shatila massacre she left the UN and worked as a volunteer in refugee and other camps in 1982-83. In 1984 she initiated and co-founded with Cliff Dolan the trade union aid body, Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA), to provide training for workers in refugee camps. Initially its Executive Director, she later worked for two years as its regional adviser in South Africa and the Middle East until early 1994, when she returned to work as a volunteer in refugee camps in Lebanon.

McCue moved to the Southern Highlands in late 1994 and in 1996 she founded the Women Refugee Education Network (WREN), an education advocacy group to bring women to Australia to talk about their work in refugee camps. In 1997 she, with others, started the 'Sorry Books' in response to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report on the Stolen Generations and was involved in the establishment of the Wingecarribee Reconciliation Group. In 2001 she founded and was the inaugural chairperson of the Wingecarribee Community Foundation, which provides support to local youth, aged, palliative and respite care, Indigenous and environmental concerns in the Southern Highlands. In 2001 she, Susan Varga and

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Anne Coombs established a network of refugee support groups, Rural Australians for Refugees, which quickly spread to other rural towns across Australia.

Since completing a PhD in political science on women in Islam at the University of New South Wales in 1999, McCue has held various academic positions including that of Visiting Honorary Associate at the University of New South Wales School of Politics and International Relations 2001-04, Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong 2002-03, and in 2005 she taught a course on Women in Islamic Civilisation at the ANU Centre for Continuing Education. Since August 2005 she has been a Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam at Melbourne University, researching Muslim women in Australia, and has completed a book on Palestinian refugee Olfat Mahmood, *Return to Tarshir*, which she hopes to publish. She has received a number of awards in recognition of her work with refugees, international development and reconciliation, and was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2003.

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**Helen and APHEDA we thank and salute you. The Elijah Barayi award has found a good home.**

Your mind-blogging solidarity is a humbling experience.

Phyllis Naidoo  
Durban  
29/10/2009.