*An interview used in "Attacking the Heart of Apartheid: The ANC's MK Special Operations Unit" (Penguin, 2025), Yunus Carrim*

# MK Special Operations Unit Project

## Interviews

## Jeanette Apelgren

## 17 December 2020

## Melbourne, Australia (telephonically)

**Your family background was covered quite a bit in the interview with your sister, Greta. But maybe you want to say a bit about whether your parents or siblings influenced you in any way to become socially and politically aware?**

Well, we came from a large mixed-race family, and I think we were just a socially aware family in the sense that we were quite aware of our social position or who we were as people. And because we were mixed race we obviously felt the South African racial issues. Our great, great grandfather is Swedish and our great, great grandmother is Zulu, on our fathers side; and Zulu and British on our mother's side. We are related to the British officer Richard Dick King who participated in the liberation of Natal from the Afrikaners in the Boer wars. His statue is on the Durban esplanade. He was my maternal grandfather's grandfather, I think. He obviously had many Zulu wives, as well as his British family – taking Zulu wives was part of a way of attaining land from the Zulus.

Before apartheid, there obviously weren't any problems with mixing, but with apartheid, families were broken apart. There were difficulties for the family, so I guess my parents were quite aware of that, that, you know, it was unjust, and there was a lot of discussion in the household about that, and that it's not right that people should be separated.

There was always a sense that there should be equality and love and fairness in the world. I guess we just grew up with those kinds of values, and when you're a large family, I think you learn to share everything, up to a sweet. If you had something, you had to share with everybody, even if it means that you took the lollipop and everyone had a lick of it before you could eat it (laughter). If you didn't want to share there was, like, real punishment, like my mother would take the lollipop and throw it away (laughter). Everything was shared, including clothing, there was no such a thing as having your own socks

or anything, everything was just pushed into the drawer and everybody took the socks that fitted you.

When there's not enough money, and there are so many people to feed, you have to share. When there was enough food, everyone got their own plates of food, but when there wasn't, then mum would put the curry and rice into a big bowl, like a washing bowl, and everyone would take a spoon and you'd eat from there. But there was always enough, because it just seemed that when you were a lot of people, everybody had no choice but to be fair. If our African relatives would sometimes come from the farm to Durban, they'd always come to the house and they'd spend the night and be fed.

There was always food for others who came somehow - that was just what it was. So when we were in the community and you see something different to your own values, it didn't make sense that people would not share and that people would be treated differently. I think there was a strong sense of that value; and that what was going on in the country was just not acceptable, the world had to change. And education was also important in our family. And men and women weren't treated any differently. Also, growing up in Wentworth, restricted to the Coloured community, you were geographically separated from your own White and African backgrounds.

But although there was only a Coloured community in Wentworth, it was quite a mixed community in terms of background and values. There were the Afrikaner Coloureds who came from the Kokstad area and the English ones from the Ladysmith area, and the people who came from Cape Town and there were many others mixed together, creating a new culture really.

And then we had all the gang violence as well because of poverty and people being traumatised by broken families and a lack of housing. We were caught up in that, and again it's a sense that you have to attend to what's going wrong in the world. I was particularly involved with trying to stop the gang violence, forming youth groups and doing other community work. I think we were always just a community family, and my mother, like I said, always entertained our African relatives and even some White relatives who would visit. My mother was quite a sociable person, so we always had relatives from everywhere coming to visit. We didn't see a difference in people whatever their background, we didn't see that as a problem, so it was really difficult for us to accept apartheid that tried to keep people apart.

My dad worked with Indian people so we always had Indian people visiting. The whole concept of needing to have everybody together was just the way it should be. I guess we were very passionate about that so when opportunities came to do something, to bring things to normal or what life should be like, we

became involved. The other influence was my father, who was involved in Coloured politics before the Coloured Representative Council (CRC) and the tricameral parliament was formed.

The CRC came when we were already in Wentworth and he wasn't involved in that. But the community rejected the CRC because it was just a useless thing, it was not even a vote, it was a semblance of a vote and the African people didn't have it, so it just didn't make sense, and it wasn't addressing the country's problems.

My father was involved in the parent-teacher committees. These bodies had very little power to improve things in schools or in the community because the government did not allow for this unless it fitted their agenda and again we realised that the more you try and change things, the more the laws came in the way to oppress you and hold you back. If you got involved in any of the state institutions of politics, you were basically rubber-stamping bad government policies so you had the choice of doing nothing and suffering the consequences or taking up arms or drinking yourself to death or what else, I don't know. It was very difficult to live in that kind of situation, so we got involved in community work.

Then we were Catholic as well, that was the other influence. We got involved in the church. But we were very tolerant of other religions as well. We ended up going to the Anglican and other churches at times. My sister had her wedding reception in a Hindu temple, even though she had a Christian wedding. We mixed with Muslim people and that was just the way it was.

**Some of your White relatives visited you. Did you visit some of them?**

No, because obviously they could come, but we couldn't go there. But also my parents didn't have a lot of money to go.

**But would you have been welcomed there?**

I think so. Obviously, they weren't hundred percent White people. They obviously had black people in their family backgrounds but they weren't going to expose themselves.

**So how do you get to be a social worker?**

Well, initially I tried to do teaching because I wanted to change people's ideas or educate people about fairness, open-mindedness and the value of knowledge to make life better. I wanted to also communicate that you didn't have to turn to gangs or violence, that you could through learning and

education understand the world better and actually make a difference. My grandparents had given us the old *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and my siblings and I read it and exposed ourselves to how life could be different.

I used to always have concerts in the neighbourhood, teach kids Maths and English, tell them stories. It was the good part of having a big family that you've always got brothers and sisters, cousins and friends around to have social activities.

If I was running a concert for my little brothers and sisters, everyone else joined. So, it was a kind of communal education. But we would learn from the encyclopaedia and share knowledge and I would highlight what's wrong in the world we're living in and that it can be made better.

I went to mainly do teaching also because you could get a government bursary. I'd seen Greta go to Western Cape University so I knew it was possible but, I mean, I did not like the idea of being in a predominantly Coloured university and I didn't like Afrikaans because we're from Durban and Afrikaans is not our language. It's an oppressive language and I wasn't going to support that language.

I found out that from one of the local girls, Carmen Mulqueeny, that because she did a Fine Arts course which was not available at the Western Cape Coloured university, she could go to Durban-Westville University. You could go there if you studied a subject not offered at the Coloured university, so I chose criminology as my extra subject and that's how I got in. When I got there in 1980, I realised that social work is probably better to bring about change because with the education system, you are hamstrung with the curriculum and you end up teaching government policy really. With social work, you're still implementing government policy but it's different because you're not actually corrupting or depriving minds of knowledge, I thought. So, I switched to social work, which also meant that I still got a bursary because I would eventually work for a government department if you got the bursary, which was very handy.

**When do you decide to become a political activist, to move beyond your social or community activism?**

Well, I was involved when I was twelve years old with the politics of the ratepayers and residents association and a bit in Coloured politics. Then later with the CRC and the tricameral parliament, we were

**Jeanette Apelgren (left) with her sister, Greta, around 1979/80, Supplied**

going around door-to-door, getting people to boycott the elections – or if they insisted on voting, then they should vote for the Labour Party which was the most progressive party standing for elections and supported one person, one vote.

Derrick McBride was also involved in the ratepayers body in the early days. Even my grandparents were involved with the Returned Service Men's League (soldiers who had served in the two World Wars) and there was a lot of discussion about the politics of it, about why the hell do you celebrate the British war, but you came home with a bicycle and you didn't get the same pension as White soldiers whom you fought with. There was always that kind of political awareness.

But I think the more active political participation came with the tricameral parliament elections. We went around placarding and going from house to house, educating people.

I always had a leadership kind of position. When I was about 15 or 16, we didn't have parks in Wentworth, we had playgrounds, so I took the initiative to convert one of them into more like a park or playground or garden like they had in the White areas. So, we had concerts to raise money for this. I got all the kids together to engage in this project. I walked all the way from Wentworth to Clairwood because I saw there were these tractors, *ganda-gandas* they called them back in the day. So, I hired a *ganda-ganda* and cleaned the local park. This Indian guy was quite amused at the whole idea, that I only had a little bit of money and such a big idea, so he said, oh, he'll give me an hour with the *ganda-ganda* to level the land to make the park and so I got that going. I jumped on the *ganda-ganda* and he drove all the way to Wentworth and my sister thought it was really funny because there I came along sitting next to the driver in the tractor, the *ganda-ganda* (laughter).

I was so determined that we were going to have a park (laughter). Initially I tried to speak to the local government rent office. I told them that it's ridiculous that we don't have a park and we're walking on these thorns. It was just frustrating.

The adults were just so useless to not do anything to improve things in the community or to demand services and I don't know why we respected the local laws anyway because these laws were just crazy and unfair. Why do we obey these stupid laws? It was just beyond me. And even the toilets in the schools were dirty, and I would say to the adults what the hell, why are you waiting for the government to clean the toilets? And the children that are getting sicker are your children. Yet the adults don't intervene and clean the toilets for their children if the government will not provide the funds to clean them.

We finished the park project, then I went to the Durban Municipality, and they did feel bad that I had cleaned the park for them, and they gave me a whole lot of plants. But then people in Wentworth stole all the plants (laughter)! And the gangsters burnt down the tyres that I put in there. It was almost like a fear of change – they were like shocked to see that life could actually be different and it seemed almost as if they were like just used to suffering. I was so upset, but then I thought, no, this is unacceptable., I went to the people I knew had taken them and demanded the flowers back. They wanted to hit me (laughter), they were terrible, but you know we had a park - and at the end of the day I didn't care. But I was upset that people would put their individual needs above those of the whole community.

I think I had just started university when the gangster problem got worse and we would wake up at night and hear the violence in the area, and one evening, there was a trail of blood leading from our yard. I followed this trail and I'm thinking this is just crazy that people are willing to die for absolute rubbish like control over some streets in the area. When I got to Hime street, an area where violence was rife, I ran back home and I said no, something has to be done, this gangster violence has got to stop. This community belongs to us all and we are all responsible for its health and well-being.

When I was older, a local woman, Mrs Tifflin, and some others, got together and worked on a community improvement project – the development of another park in Austerville. The gangs started using the park to sell their drugs and stuff as a cover so the cops wouldn't attack them and we were wondering why the cops were being mean to us? This was again a situation in which oppressed communities without power created vacuums which were filled by unsavoury actors like gangs, but we were not going to let them or the police win.

Eventually the Durban Corporation sent Lynette Jordon, a White community developer to help the community stop the violence as they feared it could seep into the neighbouring White area. So Mrs Tifflin and a couple of us got hold of an old building that was going to be demolished and turned it into a youth centre. I became part of that committee of what we called the Wentworth Improvement Project. Greta and I were involved in the development and operation of this organisation. We were able to contact wealthy White organisations and the daily newspaper and the municipality to get them to fund it. The Wentworth Improvement Project helped to develop youth into good community leaders. The UDF (United Democratic Front) and MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) recruited some people from the Wentworth Improvement Project group. This community centre still is in operation.

**How did you get drawn into MK and why?**

Well, for me it was a bit of a seamless thing with the Wentworth Improvement Project and with my increasing political involvement. I'd attended a lot of leadership programmes in the Catholic church. The Labour Party and other parties were talking about Mandela and the Freedom Charter and I was very drawn to this. It had always been a longstanding guiding principle that we need the Freedom Charter, that South Africa belongs to all who live in it and we had to be a fair, free and non-racial country. We attended the inaugural meeting when the UDF formally adopted the Freedom Charter as the guiding document of the new South Africa. This meeting was great because it represented people from all races and many grassroots groups.

I had gone speaking to the gangs and said, look, we need to stop recruiting for gangsterism and we have these youth clubs now and we now want you to join these instead, and you have to keep your gangs in the side-lines, where they belong, they can't be part of our main society in any way. So, there were a lot of meetings with gangs about what a normal society should look like and how we need people to go to university and we need peace and wealth and it's not going to happen while they're running down Wentworth. And the police are just going to be after them and this invites more oppression on us and limits our development. They agreed to not interfere in our work.

So we developed youth groups in every neighbourhood run by the young people themselves because the adults really were already so depressed and apathetic, they had no vision for the future, and so I guess it was up to the young people to change things. We had about ten youth groups and we were taking them all on leadership camps which were in camping areas outside of the neighbourhood. Many people never left the neighbourhood so this was opening them up to new opportunities and visions for their future.

When it came to MK, I guess it was that kind of progression in wanting to change the world and seeing all the possibilities of what we could do, if we had the power to change things, and if we could get the government to change.

I had managed to get a few young people from the community to get bursaries to Durban-Westville University and I found out later that the Indian Registrar there, his wife was actually Coloured. I met with him and I said I've got these 20 young people that come from Wentworth, they all have exemptions in their school results and are eligible to attend university, I'd really like for them to come to the university and not to have to travel to Cape Town which they could not afford to do. And he agreed. One became a social worker, another one a psychologist, and others finished with different degrees.

A lot of them were also conscientised towards the idea of a non-racial society. I was also conscientised at university and became part of the UDF. I went to some of the conscientising classes about what's capitalism, socialism and communism. We were mixing with people of all races who wanted change. Change seemed very possible.

By the time I was recruited by Robert into MK there was a whole journey of political activism and community influence and leadership, and I'm assuming that's the reason why Greta and I were chosen. We had that big standing in the community and we had the legitimacy of supporting a non-racial, fair South Africa.

There was the 1980s school boycotts which Robert and the other comrades were all a part of as well. We were chased by the police at university during the boycotts. We'd been shot at by police and it was clear that the Afrikaners weren't going to just hand over this country to us, nor were they going to accept peaceful change to a fair South Africa, we were going to have to take them on in every way.

I was working for the Coloured Affairs Department. The police and the SADF were getting worried about the UDF and they wanted to win the hearts and minds of people, so they tried to have these camps for young people. So, one of the Heads of Social Work asked me to go and give a talk on leadership to one of these camps that the South African Defence Force ran. The SADF didn't brief me beforehand that I was supposed to say pro-government things. I just said to the youth that they are the future leaders of the community and they need to look at their community's interests and they need to stand up for themselves even if their parents tell them that it's not okay to speak for yourselves and to lead your community in the right way, the youth still need to stand up for the best interests of the community because that is what leadership is.

One of the soldiers followed me and he was really angry, and I said, well, you didn't tell me what to say, but anyway this is what leadership is all about. I can't tell them what the government tells them to do if it is not in their community's or country's interests. That would be propaganda, that's not leadership, to tell them to do as you are told. Then, of course, I wasn't invited to do any of those talks (laughter). I was reprimanded by the boss. I soon resigned and started a new job.

**How did Robert approach you? What did he say?**

Well, Greta just said Robert wants to talk to you – she didn't say what about. But I guess one of the things about MK, was the need for discipline and not to

say too much. Robert said, 'look, I know your views, I know you're involved with the community, but at what point are you going to continue doing what you're doing when you know that it's not working and there are forces out there in the world that can help and we can actually bring about the change that we need to see in the community?' To me, I was getting success, but I suppose I was making change within the system, but I also knew that I was going to suffer the consequences anyway – and he was right, one had to take a stand for change.

I guess he had that logic that you have to think about the fact that you're going to die anyway. You're going to have to just choose really how you're going to die and what the purpose of your life is really. That was the kind of thinking I had. I mean he didn't discuss it with me in that kind of way, but it was like, you need to take a stand at some point in your life. It's a bit like you've been asked to serve your country in a way and you've got to put your money where your mouth is, you can't just go around saying a free, fair South Africa and not actually wanting to fight for it.

He described the role of a MK recruit. He said at the end of the day we have to do this wisely and if you do get involved, you'll be recruited and it's expected that we'll all do what we need to do, but you won't know what the next person is doing, even who the next person is. It's like a dream, you have to always forget about it and you can't tell anybody, it's like you have to live two lives. Even if you're caught one day, we expect that people will tell whatever they know, but will actually only talk about what they've been involved with but not what others have done because they won't know that. You have to be so disciplined that you don't ask questions.

I remember when we met with Rashid, the idea was don't ask questions that don't belong to you and your mission because if you know more than you need to, you're just going to compromise everybody else. The guys like (Matthew) Lecordier I didn't know much about all of them and I was also a little bit rigid about not knowing.

So for me, it was a seamless thing of making a decision that you're a soldier if you're asked to be, you're serving your country.

**But you could have chosen to continue with your progressive social work and community and UDF activism, which were also contributing to the liberation struggle? Why go into the armed struggle?**

I guess because it was that sense that you do have to sacrifice, we weren't going to get what we really wanted with all that social work happening, you're actually part of the system. Of course, there's radical social work theory that

speaks about the need to actually make radical change, not that you only end up making reforms within the system which the government allows. But there were not enough opportunities to actually make people's lives better without removing the government. You needed to give people the vote, you needed to actually share the land, you needed to do so much more. This was never going to be done any other way aside from the armed struggle or the threat of it.

I guess I was a little bit naive in that sense because part of the reality is, if you're going to get involved, it's not only about you dying, but it's going to be messy and other people may get hurt. You look at the Mandela story romantically, so I kind of envisioned it'll be like that, you just blew up a couple of power lines at two o'clock in the morning, there will be no one around, or you blow up OK Bazaars, when nobody's there and this will force the White community to vote for a different system of government which will address the whole country's needs not just their own needs, which these small acts of resistance were going to threaten.

The White community had to be conscripted to fight for apartheid and so they too had to go to war to keep their privileges.

But I must say I did think why the hell should this be me, can't Robert pick somebody else? I was frustrated thinking, ja, let somebody else do it, this is crap. But then you also have that conviction that you have been called and you have to put your money where your mouth is if you're saying to people that you can be free. You have to be able to make this happen. Otherwise, you're an agent of the government whether you like it or not.

**At the time Robert recruited you, did you know that Greta had already joined?**

She said she was involved, but nothing more. But then again you don't discuss it because that was the rule, you don't talk about stuff in the MK unit.

**Did you have a partner at that time?**

Yes.

**And did he know?**

No, fortunately, even right now, he's not interested in one bit of politics (laughter), so when the police arrested me, they picked him up at Toyota where he was working, he really thought I was innocent and he knew absolutely nothing. But he lived in Ogle Road where Lecordier and all the other members of the unit were, so the police were quite convinced that he must've

known, but of course when they spoke with him, they realised he is so apolitical, he's, like, I don't know who Mandela is (laughter)….

**What was your first activity in MK?**

We had to have code names, and I got Helen. Robert said I'm Helen of Troy. He said you would be called on a mission anytime, you don't get notice of a mission. I didn't go for military training. You won't be given details of a mission but you'll be told what you have to do when the time comes.

**When Robert approached you, did you ask him to give you time to think about it or did you immediately agree?**

I can't remember. I think I just said, well, it's the right thing to do.

**So between the time you agree to join MK and your first mission, how long was it?**

I can't remember. Maybe a month. We made the visits to Botswana. I went with Robert, Gordon Webster and Greta.

I was told to bring my car and we had to behave like lovers, I was with Gordon, and Greta was with Robert, and we were going to go to Botswana and stay in motels. It was going to be like a resort, so I just acted like a tourist. We went twice. We were only there for weekends. The second time we met Rashid. The first time I think we just went and Robert did what he needed to do. We met a couple of the other MK operatives and brought whatever we needed to bring in. Probably supplies to conduct missions.

**Did you have any political induction or any political discussion while there?**

No.

**So when you got back, what's the first operation you take part in?**

There was the bombing of the power station in Wentworth. Greta and I just drove the car and picked someone up and transported them to where Robert was, I think. I can't remember who, but it might have been Lecordier.

And then we also went to Shongweni to hide some arms and other military devices. Again, it was a need-to-know basis so I actually didn't see what exactly was there. I was a really good soldier from that point of view.

Then there was the Pine Street Parkade mission. I was at work and Greta said to me 'Robert wants you to take him somewhere'. I met him at a Checkers shopping centre and he got into the car. He had a parcel with him, and he told me where to go and park which was next to a car in the parkade. Then the reality sunk in about what he might be doing. He put a parcel under the car next to us and we just drove out. I thought, oh shit, this is the real stuff. Then, I think, the reality of not being able to be involved in decision-making suddenly struck. The whole reality of what being a soldier actually means hit me and the romantic notion of guerrilla warfare fell away at that point.

It's one thing blowing up an empty building, it's a whole other thing hurting people and it being the kind of warfare that some people may say is terrorism. It was, like, oh my God, that was just beyond what I thought we'd do. That was quite dramatic, I suppose, but like they say, the reality of that was most difficult.

Then, of course, I didn't want to be involved. But soon after that I think the State of Emergency came and I was arrested for my involvement in the Wentworth Improvement Project and UDF activities.

**Were you asked by Robert to assist again and you said no or that you were not available anymore or you didn't say anything?**

I just said that I was not available.

**What was the outcome of that parkade mission?**

Well, I left Robert at his place and just continued with my work.

A security guard saw the bomb and then called the police and they sorted it. They shut the city centre down and the army had it removed. But Robert later said it wasn't a real bomb, but a dummy – It couldn't explode, but the aim was to create chaos and fear. The police managed to find it and Durban was cornered off, buses and other vehicles had to be moved away. Robert's explanation was that it was meant as payment for a raid by the SADF in a neighbouring country and the killing of some ANC activists. I guess it had its impact because that really scared White people into the reality and power of the ANC, it came right home to them that they could no longer ignore the plight of their fellow citizens and immorally enjoy the fruits of apartheid at the expense of their fellow citizens.

It was one thing blowing up power stations and the lights just going off and then it being reconnected. This parkade mission was really fearful for everyone.

I think there was a lot of anger in the public as well because it was, well we all can die, but there was a realisation that change was needed.

**Robert says it was a dummy, not a real bomb, that was meant to convey to the government that the ANC was ever-present and they needed to negotiate with it instead of dismissing this, as they had just done by that raid at a time when they needed to be more positive about the Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group who were in South Africa to encourage negotiations with the ANC and other liberation movements.**

Yes, that's what Robert said.

**Was your car used in the Magoo's Bar operation?**

That's right.

**You were not aware that your car was being used?**

No, I was in prison at this time due to the State of Emergency.

**Do you have any views about the Magoo's Bar bombing?**

It's interesting because my views were very coloured by the fact that we were in prison at the time and everyone was feeling pretty helpless, and that this is where we are, and it's unfair and people were going to be in there for long. So when the bombing happened the detainees were, like, oh yay, somebody's fighting back for us, which was seen as really good. Then once we started hearing that people had died, I think the sadness came in and it's, oh my God, are we really expecting people to pay with their lives for this?

On the one hand, it was jubilation that there were people fighting to save us and, on the other hand, there was that worry about sacrifices that everyone's needing to make.

**Did you think that Robert and them might have done it?**

No. It was only when Greta was caught and she had my passport with her that the police actually realised I might be involved with MK, and they moved me from among the other detainees into solitary confinement.

**How long were you in prison before that happened?**

I think maybe two to three months?

**What did they say to you when they moved you?**

They told me that Robert and Greta had admitted to everything and I thought, oh well, they're following the code that we say whatever we know, that we don't know about anybody else's role in the unit because in reality we did not know anything except our own roles. Greta had taken my passport from my grandmother's and it was found on her. Greta may have taken the passport with the intention of hiding it later to protect me. However, she also may have not had it and the police may have just said that she had it. But anyway it's the way life goes.

So then, the security police were really angry with me, 'you're sitting here in detention, you could've done something, but you said nothing', they said. They got you to write down who your friends are, like Facebook. I would imagine Facebook must be based on that (laughter) because they got you to write down every single person you knew. Every detainee – who they knew, their parents, siblings, cousins, friends, those who went to school with them and so on. The police then joined the dots on who was connected to you.

They contacted these people and by a process of elimination, they tried to work out who worked with you. And after my release people told me about this, even the gangsters who said, 'what the hell were you all doing here, we knew you and we had to tell the police that. Now we feel like we're all terrorists, what have you done? (laughter). I thought: you've murdered people for personal gain and you're asking me what I've done (laughter)!

**What was detention like? Do you want to speak about it or not?**

I don't mind. The solitary confinement was bad. I just sat there and they gave me an hour in an area next to the cell to exercise daily. But after three months I was beginning to hallucinate and see snakes, worms and whatever. You assume that the phone is ringing, your mind goes funny and I'd be going to pick up a phone but there wasn't any phone. You think that your family's calling you, and they're not because it's not reality.

Then they moved me to the hospital section of the prison and gave me some anti-depressants. I think there was also anti-psychotic medication. The psychiatrist was terrible and she said I shouldn't even be having these silly hallucinations to begin with because perhaps I think that I will get released if I say all this. This did not make sense because I didn't care at that stage about being released – I was confused but still committed to the cause. But anyway I said to her it's fine, I'm better now, I can go back to the solitary confinement

rather than being undermined. The break of talking to someone did help as it brought reality to my mind.

Then, of course, I agreed to be a state witnesses because it made sense to me.

**Why did you turn state witness? What did they say to you that made you agree to this?**

It was a practical reality, firstly, because Robert's instructions were just to do what you need to do and you say what you need to, because nothing will incriminate you as you don't know anything and you don't know enough to incriminate anybody. I guess that's where Robert was quite sacrificial on himself. He was a good leader from that point of view. His approach was that as many people who can get out need to get out and 'I will sort out whatever I need to sort out and the struggle will continue'. Greta would have got a much higher prison sentence if I didn't turn state witness because they would have to make assumptions that she knew everything. The way I presented my evidence, it was that she, just like me, would've known hardly anything, and so on the balance of probabilities she was semi-innocent.

**Did you feel bad about being a state witness? Were you criticised by people in the Wentworth community and others?**

I expected criticism a bit. It's one thing to just say, yes, this is the soldier's way and this is what's going to happen, but I think you are going to get consequences for everything you do. It was difficult, but I had no choice. At least, you can get out and continue the struggle. It's about all of us making sacrifices, whether in prison or in other aspects of the struggle. We all knew what we were getting into and if I was the leader of the cell I would have expected others in the unit to give state evidence against me because that's the code by which we operated, that one person takes all the blame and the others get out and continue the struggle.

**When you got out, did you experience any overt criticism from others, like that you sold out to the police or that you sold out your own sister?**

There was a little bit of that but not a lot, as far as I know. Mostly it came from some of the Wentworth Improvement Project centre people who felt a loyalty to other members of the unit, but it was more people not saying anything or not being in touch, or saying welcome back. I guess that also people were afraid to be associated with me in case they got into trouble with the police. That's not what I wanted because I'm job-focused and want to see outcomes,

and I took part with Robert in that same sense, so the criticism was not important. I wanted to get the best outcome for people so I was not particularly looking for praise or wanting anything else.

But I guess Greta was concerned about the criticism of me. When she came out, she was a little bit anxious about that kind of stuff. She was protective of the whole team too.

The situation was depressing and anxiety provoking when I was out of prison because of the conflicting feelings and beliefs – concerns about being associated with the armed struggle and what that entails, and concerns also about people not understanding why I had become a state witness.

I think I felt that those who might have criticised me hadn't done anything in the struggle, they haven't put themselves on the line, so the last person I'm going to take any kind of criticism from is somebody who hasn't had to make that choice, who is sitting comfortable watching TV and not fighting to make real change for the community. I mean, I could have been like them and got pregnant and had a good time and gone to the clubs. I did go to the clubs and stuff, but I didn't just do that, I was involved in fighting for people's rights and freedoms and prosperity. I could've been like my husband, not knowing anything about politics (laughter) or not even caring. I could have just been having a good time and wearing high fashion takkies.

**What was your parents' response to two of their daughters being involved in the armed struggle?**

I think there was a bit of an expectation that eventually something would happen to us because of what we were doing in the community, but not that we'd get involved in the armed struggle. They were resigned to us getting arrested maybe but not for the armed struggle.

My mother was quite angry at the police like a real mother would be, how dare you do this to my children, they're my children? Eric, my brother, was also in Westville Prison during the State of Emergency. But after a while, like with a lot of black parents, it's just like, oh well, it's God's will and there's acceptance of what was, and the need for them to just keep moving forward.

**Gordon and Robert and the rest of you were initially in one unit and then, after a discussion with Rashid, it was decided to split into two units, one led by Gordon and the other by Robert. Do you know about that?**

Yes.

**I read that Robert, Gordon, Greta and you went for like a farewell separation dinner along the beach somewhere. Do you remember this?**

I can't remember that.

**Can you remember what emerged beyond the little you told me, when you met with Rashid?**

I think I was talking more about the excitement of how we're going to change South Africa and I think he was quite clinical in his approach, that change is going to come, and we do what we need to do, and don't worry too much. He was also saying don't talk too much because you're not supposed to.

**Do you remember what your impressions were of him?**

He was quite mysterious actually, maybe like somebody from a Bond movie. Like I say, he was clinical, I think very much thoughtful and clear that we had a job to do and we must. And he said we're all part of the movement. But very caring too, I think. He also wanted to normalise the situation, and he said, you're at a resort, just enjoy it, let's just get done with what we came here for, but also have a good time, but not too much of a good time.

**Do you want to say anything about Robert's leadership role?**

Obviously, we grew up together, we knew the McBrides from down the road. His father was such a big character in the community. I think he started the first residents' association meetings that I went to actually. Mr McBride was such a loud, anti-government character.

Robert was also always known as a very intelligent person, but interestingly he didn't have the same kind of background that we did in terms of the community and social work and the youth groups and all of that. I think maybe he came with the tail end of that. He did get a bit involved in our leadership groups, I think. He was obviously friends with people in the youth groups. He was very influenced by his father's beliefs, I think.

Mr McBride was also involved I think at some stage with the Returned Servicemen's League. Robert was very clear in his thinking. I think you needed somebody like that. I'm sure he would've been a great military leader.

Greta may have different visions of him. She respected him and his bravery considering that there were not many Coloureds involved in fighting for the rights of the people.

That story where Robert shot one of the gangsters who tried to attack him showed that he wasn't going to tolerate that kind of violence in the community which was a kind of oppression by these young men, who used violence to get their own way in the community. The violence had to be tackled, you couldn't keep running away from the gangsters, you run away from one of them, then others chase you. Robert must have felt that enough is enough, he had to defend himself there. At what point do you actually stop and defend yourself or do you just keep running, something's got to give? This showed leadership but was also a catalyst for many of us getting involved in activism and armed struggle – the oppression was causing internal violence which was misplaced opposition.

Robert's not over the top as well. He's not a show off about what he did. He's not an opportunist like many politicians are. He's not into money purely for the sake of having it. He's quite honourable in that sense. He has good values. His father's entrepreneurial spirit of having a business in the area was also leadership, as most people in the community didn't go into business and tended to have jobs or expect to be given one or earn one through limited government means.

**And Gordon?**

He's like Robert in some respects. But Gordon doesn't speak much, but you can just see in his eyes he's a got a deep thinking, planning mind, and it's not messy. He's not like some of these people who will talk a lot and then do nothing. Gordon's one of these quiet guys who has a mission and just does it. He and Robert weren't just freedom fighters for the sake of it, they were leaders guiding a community to a higher end. The whole unit and even those whom people would call gangsters like Lecordier, had a sense that things had to change and you've got to play a part in it. They were going to use their gangster ways to improve things, to fight for democracy. I suppose gangsterism is like an opposition to the main society and the creation of another negative system to address the power and economic imbalances.

**Jeanette Apelgren, more recently**

**Do you want to say anything about Greta?**

I think we're two different personalities with similar community care values. We're obviously both social workers, but I'm very pragmatic, I suppose, in some

ways. She is very disciplined and goal directed. Even to come to Australia I didn't really want to go initially, because I was quite committed to changing South Africa but my husband wanted to and I agreed because it made sense. Part of me felt I did betray the unit so do I deserve to stay even though I knew that I did what was required? Part of me felt maybe I should go because I've done my bit for the country and now others can take over.

I knew that I needed to go when I worked at Durban Indian Child Welfare after I came out of prison, and we were protesting about children in detention and we were demanding their release and the provision of suitable homes for them and I realised that I was going to be arrested again, and I said this is just crazy, so it's probably better for me to go, because I'm probably going to just end up back in jail. I left South Africa in 1989 but I tried to help in the struggle from afar or I have raised funds and funded development programmes in the country, which is what I've done over the years. I've sent containers of second hand goods and computers, and I've been sending money for different projects. I'm still a social worker.

**What do you make of where South Africa is now?**

I think it's still very exciting. I know there are very different views, but I just think for me the fact that people can live wherever they want and that they have a democratic vote is just amazing. I used to run the South African Australian Association, When I first came to Australia. There was a small organisation in Melbourne and they were just raising funds, it seemed to me, to go to parties for themselves, and I thought you're absolutely mad if you think I'm doing that when they can afford to fund their own parties. So we joined the organisation and steered it towards sending money to South Africa for development projects and also to projects for people in need in Melbourne.

I've been back to South Africa a number of times and I think it's great. Because I'm in Australia I get a different perspective on things. Yes, there's corruption, but to me there's corruption everywhere, and I do see the big picture of the role that America and the UK and the big world economic markets play in shaping the whole economic situation in the country. Unfortunately, the South Africans in Australia and many at home do not always see the big picture. They are always on about what's negative in the country, they don't stop and think, well what does this mean for the country and what forces are influencing these events?

Even back in the day I used to always think, well this is bigger than just us. There were the sanctions and other international measures that also contributed toward changes in South Africa, not just the armed struggle and the grassroots activism. There was a  slow attempt by the government to

respond to change. It’s not just about where you are sitting right now, you have to have an understanding of all factors affecting positive change in South Africa. The country was changed by people being involved in achieving freedom.

To me, I just think the country’s in a really good space. It’s got a lot of clever people working to keep the country productive, even though there’s a brain drain by skilled people leaving. Frequently the people leaving still contribute to their families and to the country. The people at home are ambitious. They want change and they are committed to making changes. I mean if you see the ‘born frees’, (people born since the birth of democracy in April 1994) they are just amazing. They’re hungry for education and work. Of course, to me it’s mostly positive stuff – but many people focus on the crime. Well, crime is everywhere. In Australia we have similar crimes, like gender violence, robberies etc, but we don’t talk about it all the time, we focus on the good values we uphold, like fairness and everyone having a chance to do well. I get upset when people don’t recognise the horrors of apartheid and don’t acknowledge the good that is taking place in the country.

**Do you have any regrets about your role in MK and the armed struggle?**

It’s hard to say regrets because I mean you always just regret it if anything bad happens, but I think it’s an inevitable that as a soldier you have to face that. I’m sure any other soldier from whatever country feels that way, I’m sure the US soldiers who’ve gone to Afghanistan, they loved fighting for their country, but there’s a lot of regrets about what they did or why they did it and the meaning of it. To me, I’m glad that I was able to take a stand because you needed to take a stand, and today the country is free because of that stand that a few of us did take. It’s healthy to regret and feel sadness for any hurt caused.

But ja, war is never a nice thing and nobody should be called on to do it and I hope my child or anybody else’s child never gets called on to fight any stupid war. Or to fight to bring about change when we can actually bring about change without doing that, which is why I send money to address problems before they cause violence of any kind. There’s got to be other solutions. And there’s a lot of other things that we can do aside from buying weapons or killing or causing people to suffer unnecessarily.