The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

BONNIE BROWN

Interviewed By: Daniel Whitman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Bonnie, we are talking here in part because of your activities in South Africa when you lived there and were associated with the consulate in Johannesburg. Let's sum up. In the spirit of Stu Kennedy who created this methodology, you were raised where and you went to school where and something about you as a person and as a professional. Could you give us some of that?

BROWN: I was born in Canada and raised near Seattle. My parents emigrated when I was three so I am an American with fond memories of Canada. I went to Whitman College as an undergraduate and studied political science, and to Boalt Hall, School of Law at Berkeley, for my law degree and then to Washington, DC to work for the FCC. There I did mostly adjudicatory work and became the legal branch chief for the broadcast bureau. Then I met my husband who was a Foreign Service officer and everything changed.

We went first to Brazzaville. I had six weeks of French, left my job and became an ambassador's wife, so life changed very dramatically.

Our second posting was in Johannesburg, South Africa, 1984 to 1987.

Q: Ken Brown had earlier assignments but the one we are beginning to focus on is ambassador to Brazzaville, '81 to '84.

BROWN: It was ’82 to ’84, actually.

Q: Yes, ’82 to ’84 and then he stayed in the African area, became the consul general in Johannesburg.

Not to dwell on this more than the story we are going to get to, which is your own activities, but what went into the decision to go to Johannesburg? There may have been other opportunities? Do you remember your own reactions? This is as you say, born in Canada, went to Whitman College, Berkeley, a lawyer and then suddenly everything changed.

BROWN: I had considerable reservations about going to South Africa. I wasn’t entirely comfortable with our government policy at that time. I felt we weren’t doing enough to undermine apartheid. My views on that changed later because I came to realize that individuals can make things better, and it was important to have people in diplomatic positions that cared about the issues and about promoting change in South Africa. I think my husband was clearly one of those people and I know he was an agent of change. He made a difference.

Q: I believe that he did. We are going to concentrate today on the things that you did.

What you have just said is a summation of many debates about constructive engagement and boycotts and there was a very lively debate, certainly in the ‘70s, going into the ‘80s, and you hit Johannesburg just about at the peak of the debates.

BROWN: Yes, including the Sullivan principles.

Q: The Sullivan principles, very hotly debated. Better to have them but then having them implied being complicit with the system. They are both arguments, I think.

BROWN: Well, there were also mixed results. One unexpected result was that some of the best companies in terms of labor policy and community development were the first to leave. Kodak, for example, had been very important in Soweto where it had supported a number of sheltered projects, primarily for the disabled. It created employment and was a model for decent employment practices. Its leaving was a tragedy. In contrast, some of the companies that were the least responsible stayed on.

Q: The least socially responsible or the least guilty when you say the least responsible?

BROWN: Socially responsible, I would say.

Q: The companies that left, do you think they did so because they thought it was the right thing or because they were responding to political pressure back home?

BROWN: That's hard to answer. The people I talked to most were from Barclay's Bank. I think there was a real split among the executives there as to what their purposes were and how they evaluated their role. It would be very difficult for an outsider to speculate about that.

Q: What we do know is that all of these companies were very much in the limelight, being observed very closely by the people politically active and wanting to have change in South Africa. Both sides of the debate were always there. Be there and do what you can versus refuse to show any complicit behavior with the regime.

So you went there. This is very interesting. You went there with some misgivings.

BROWN: Yes.

Q: About going there at all?

BROWN: Yes. I had come from a family where social justice was an important issue, very important to my parents, and I am a liberal person both philosophically and politically, so it was difficult. In fact, I talked about it with my father at the time and he was of the view that one can always help to change things.

Q: From within. Did that argument persuade you pretty easily or did it take a while for you to recover? Did you have any comfort intellectually or ethically before arriving or did this happen really after you arrived?

BROWN: I think after. I thought I had a fairly good understanding of what apartheid was all about, but one doesn't unless one is there and sees what it is like. It was a complicated matrix of reinforcing laws and regulations.

Q: You had misgivings. Did it approach dread? How willing were you to go? You just discovered many, many things after arriving. Were you reluctant to go?

BROWN: Well, my husband felt it was important to go and that was a big consideration. I trust his judgment on things and we talked a lot about it. Each posting is a bit of an adventure anyway. You know, I haven't thought about this for quite a while.

Q: Can you remember your first impression? You arrived, had you ever been to Johannesburg before going on your posting?

BROWN: No.

Q: So you arrived at Jan Smuts airport, as they used to call it. The minute you arrived you saw apartheid being played out. Do you remember the first day you arrived?

BROWN: No, but I can describe our home and neighborhood.

Q: Please.

BROWN: We had a little jewel of a house in the white suburbs. What was so amazing is if you went into the backyard you could see swimming pools and tennis courts in every yard as far as the eye could see in either direction. Domestic workers were confined to the homes in which they worked because of the pass laws. Women workers had Wednesday afternoons off: men Thursday afternoons. Generally, you would see them at the curb talking to friends and hesitant to go far because of the pass laws. If someone disappeared, you had to go and find him because of the possibility of mistreatment by the security forces.

Once we had friends staying at our home and our gardener disappeared, so they went to all the surrounding police stations to find him. He'd been picked up.

Q: Picked up because he was in the street violating the rules of apartheid?

BROWN: He may not have had his pass, I don't know. What one did know is that if you didn't find someone quickly, he or she could wind up injured. I don't think we had a consular convention that protected our premises, so I was always worried about what would happen if there were a pass raid at our home and what would I do? Of course, I wouldn't have any legal right to say no, no, don't come in.

Q: We didn't have a consular convention? Now, isn't that fairly unusual?

BROWN: I don't know the history of that at this point. This was almost 25 years ago.

Q. What did the white community, including our diplomats, know about apartheid at that time?

BROWN: The wealth of the white community at that time was so evident and extraordinary. Most outsiders, including Americans, didn't visit the townships or homelands.

Early on we went to an American Chamber of Commerce dinner and one of the officers came up to my husband and said, "Welcome to paradise." A lot of the American business community became seduced by the wealth and ease of living for white people. At that same dinner I sat next to a man and we began talking about the mixing of races. It was kind of mischievous of me, but I said, "My husband is part Cherokee." And he stopped short. He was South African: he looked across to where my husband was at another table and said, "Ah, but it's all right. He's assimilated." I loved it.

This lack of comprehension was also the case among the embassy community -- more in the embassy community in Pretoria than in the consulate community in Johannesburg. Again, people were seduced by the way of life they could have there. It was very upstairs, downstairs. People could have servants. The DCM's wife at one of her teas announced

that if people couldn't afford to pay maids properly, they simply shouldn't have them and this created a great hubbub. People were offended and carried on.

Q: This seems like centuries ago. It is hard to imagine how recent this was.

BROWN: We lost a baby when we were in South Africa. My husband was on the board of an SOS Village and at that point we thought foreigners could adopt a child fairly easily in South Africa. We found out it was just a terrible process. We fell in love with a little girl at an SOS village whom we finally adopted here in the United States after getting legal custody of her in South Africa. We were at a business dinner one evening, sitting with a South African couple, former diplomats who had served in the South African Embassy in Washington for seven years, I think in public affairs. My husband was talking to the wife about our efforts to adopt this little girl and once she found out that the child was in the group classified as "colored" she said, "Ach, take the child back to the institution and get yourself another dog."

Later that evening she made a point of sitting with me and giving me the same advice. We both said the same thing to her, that it was much too late. We loved this little girl. We went home that night and talked about it and Ken wondered if he should write a cable about what the woman had said, because it was so reflective of the way people regarded race. This woman was all sympathy, thinking about a child getting a home, until she found out the child was biracial.

Her reaction was shocking but not surprising, but it had a profound effect on both of us. This was a couple that had lived in the United States and yet didn't understand the effect their racial views had on Americans.

Q: I see. So the idea was mixing races is bad. Is that it?

BROWN: No, they wouldn't have approved of us adopting a black child. After we left South Africa, we became the subject of a talk show and some hateful articles in newspapers, which was disturbing. There were a couple of reporters in the white press who leaked the fact that we were trying to adopt a child, but people in the black and colored communities and some in the white were very supportive of us.

Q: That's most interesting. So you have really lived this very personally, the attitudes of the systems.

Was there any question of the legality of what you were doing?

BROWN: Oh, yes.

Q: When you say 'leaked' you are talking about giving information that could sabotage the adoption.

BROWN: It could have. We were given legal custody by the colored minister of social welfare with the understanding that we would adopt her when we got to the United States. So I was nervous until the plane left the tarmac, I thought that something could happen. Our security officer took Pinkie and me to the airport well before take-off time and we didn't go by South African Airlines. We flew British Airlines. So that was it.

When we got here we were able to adopt her.

Q: How old was she?

BROWN: She was eight.

Q: When you left?

BROWN: Eight.

Q: This is an amazing story. How did you find her? Where did you first see her?

BROWN: She was one of three little girls we became fond of at the SOS Village in Ennerdale. We tracked down her birth mother, who is Zulu. Pinkie had been given up at the age of six months because her community would not accept the fact that her father was white. Pinkie was originally given to a colored couple. We don't know all that happened to her during the years she was in foster care.

Anyway, her mother gave us permission to adopt Pinkie. Her mother, who lived in a township outside of Durban, asked that we come there and participate in a ceremony. It turned out to be kind of a marriage ceremony that united our two families and was attended only by women and my husband Ken. Ken was asked to bring a sheep and he worried that he was going to have to slaughter it. Fortunately, a man in the community did the slaughtering. After the sheep was killed, Pinkie's mother poured sheep bile over our hands and feet and told us we shouldn't wash until we got back to the States. But we did when we got to the airport.

Q: So this was sort of like a baptism almost or something that united. You used the word 'marriage.' But you are talking about the biological mother of the child you adopted. So this was a ceremony which actually consecrated that the two families could share something and in this case, it was sharing Pinkie. That's remarkable.

BROWN: At that point, Pinkie could not have lived with her Zulu relatives because she had a different racial classification. That just shows how insidious the whole idea of race was. Now, back here in the United States, she identifies herself with the African American community, but with white parents. It has been a long road for her.

Q: It is important to realize that we see this sort of thing happening with some frequency in the U.S. now, but a very short time ago this type of relationship was most unusual, most unusual. It sounds like history from long ago but in a fact, it is very recent.

I have spoken with a number of South Africans previously classified as colored and they do tell the story of not being accepted in either community and I think increasingly nowadays, identifying themselves as black. That's how they see themselves. It is a very odd position to be in where there is stratification, but you don't belong to the class above and you don't belong to the class below. It is a very, very stressful position to be in, I think.

BROWN: The colored community had the most difficulty. The SOS Village where Pinkie lived was in a colored township. SOS gave a party for Pinkie when she left that was very moving. The children there ranged from children who were as dark as could be to a little girl you could have found on the streets of Belfast. They sang 'Jesus Loves the Little Children of the World, Red and Yellow, Black and White.' The children sang that for Pinkie and I lost it. I cried. I still tear up when I think about that. If ever there was a place where that didn't work for children, it was there.

Q: These were children in a colored community?

BROWN: Yes, orphans in an SOS Village in a colored township.

Q: They were in an ambient society that had disdain for that idea. They themselves had the idea? They really did believe in acceptance of diversity, do you think? Or do you think they were singing a song that they did not really understand?

BROWN: I don't know. That is a hymn one often hears. I think they probably took comfort from it in some ways without realizing the full implications. That's how I would look at it.

Q: Were the children Pinkie's age, eight?

BROWN: They ranged from infants up to I guess 16. At 16 they were let go. I think the colored community has had the most difficulty psychologically. There is quite a bit written about that because they didn't have a cultural identity, a clear one anyway. That's a real oversimplification.

Q: I have heard a number of people of that category say exactly that denied an identity in some cases. Now that these labels supposedly don't exist, they say, "I am black," because there is an identity there.

BROWN: Had the government been smart, it could have co-opted them politically, very easily by embracing them.

Q: This was a nasty system and a very rigorous one and as you have said, it had many arcane details that kept it going.

Now let's go back a bit, chronologically. You have arrived in Johannesburg. I know that you did some very interesting activities in the community and in some cases you brought the community into your home. Let's talk about those experiences.

BROWN: Well, I started working as the educational advisor for USIA as a 'PIT.'

Q: Actually we should explain why this was ethically possible because Ken was a ConGen and at that time USIA was an autonomous agency. Therefore there was no possible nepotism. Nowadays, this would not be possible. That is worth a footnote in this history.

BROWN: There were lots of very privileged white students who came for counseling about where to go to school, scholarships, and things like that, but also a lot of students from Soweto and so I got to know them.

Q: You were what? An academic counselor?

BROWN: Yes. I got to know a woman by the name of Sebolelo Mohajane, the director of the Careers Center in Soweto and a chairman of the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee. She invited me to her center where I helped out and we became close friends. Then we decided to get women together from various communities.

Q: Was the center in Soweto?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: So this was a bootstraps operation?

BROWN: Yes, but an active and important one in the community.

We started on our project to get women together by inviting six educators to lunch at our house, three from Soweto and three from the official US community, and they got along pretty well. Then, a month later, we added a few more. Within less than a year we had 80 or 90 women, not only from the embassy community, but also from the black, colored, and Indian communities and then finally Afrikaners as well. The political range became much broader; from people who posed no problem to the government to those who did and who had been in detention or under house arrest, the whole range was there.

In fact, there was a funny story as we were leaving Johannesburg. I was at a party in the Indian township with a group of women and one little lady came up and said, "I would like to come to one of your luncheons." She continued: But you know, I am Stalinist, my dear." She and her husband had been very active in the Labor and anti-apartheid movements in the very early years. I chuckled and thought, good lord. She looked like a kindly lavender-scented old grandmother. So I had to say, "Oh, I am sorry. I won't be having any more luncheons because we are leaving."

Anyway, the luncheons became increasingly important as the political situation worsened. Women across racial and political lines could meet at our house and discuss what was happening. The importance of being able to do this became apparent during the luncheon held on the first day of the first state of emergency. Security forces had detained people and surrounded union and religious buildings in the early hours of the day. Yet women called asking if the luncheon were still on. I said yes, people were on their way. That day women talked about 1976, when their children were detained or shot or went missing in Soweto.

Q: '76 was Sharpeville, wasn't it?

BROWN: No, it was when security forces fired on children in Soweto who were protesting the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of instruction. One woman at the luncheon told us that her son had disappeared that day and she had never found out what had happened to him. It was a very emotional experience for the American women, an epiphany. We became a single community of mothers.

The luncheons became a regular event throughout the states of emergency. People were forbidden to gather, but because my husband was consul general, they could come to our home. It was the one place where people could meet and talk freely.

We also had a lot of representational events where we brought people together. I don't know how scientific this is, but I always thought there was a kind of ratio you needed to have for people to mix well and that basically you needed at least 65 percent from black, colored and Indian communities for people to get the right balance for interaction. That conclusion is not scientific, it's what appeared to work.

Q: You talked about the way in which people felt comfortable to speak freely and you said this was partly because this was the residence of the consul general. Tell me more about that. Do you think free speech of that type, people telling their own genuine thoughts to one another, is this something they had any opportunity to do prior to coming to your house?

BROWN: I don't know. I imagine a few of them did. The ambassador when we first got there, Herman Nickel, had a very small range of black contacts. Pretoria was a very different culture than Johannesburg.

Q: Oh, absolutely, Johannesburg was a big metropolis. At that time Pretoria was a very small, conservative place.

BROWN: Our house was pretty open. Because of my interest in education and work with another educator in Soweto, we became interested in a small school there. The children frequently came for sports days at our house.

We invited a lot of people to our home. We felt it was very important, particularly during the states of emergency when people could not meet. The few places they could meet were in our home, the political officer's home, the labor officer's home.

Q: So Americans made themselves available for this type of dialogue. Now you said there was no consular convention so in fact, you had no legal protection for doing this.

BROWN: I think our protection stemmed from my husband's position. I knew we weren't protected against pass raids and some of our neighbors had suffered them and their servants had been rousted out.

I did the educational advising for a few months and then the political officer asked me if I would take over the human rights and self-help grants.

Q: Was that the Ambassador's Fund?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: When you said 'epiphany for American women' did you sense or in retrospect do you think we are talking about spouses of American officers?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: Were they surprised to see open conversations of this type? In what way did they change because of these events?

BROWN: I think women who worked at the embassy and the consulate saw the human face of apartheid and what happens to women like themselves who just happened to be black South Africans. They were pushed to ask themselves what if this had happened to my child? Or to think, this woman is intelligent, she would be valued by any other society. Also a few of the women who came to those luncheons were detained. We knew them.

Q: Do you think that is because they attended these sessions?

BROWN: No, I think because of other activities, although there was an arbitrariness to how the government acted. The arbitrariness was terrifying and clearly was one tool that permitted a small group of white people to control a large number of black people. Security was very tight.

Almost everything that people did was watched. The government didn't permit leaders to emerge for very long. People would develop as leaders and then disappear or be detained. This happened to generation after generation.

Q: It was disabling any social cohesion that might change the system in some way.

You said 80 to 90 women. Did they ever all come at the same time? You had that many in your house?

BROWN: Yes, routinely. We had it about once every six weeks.

Q: That's a pretty large group, 80 to 90.

BROWN: The women came from the surrounding black, colored, and Indian townships, as well as from the white communities in Johannesburg and Pretoria.

There is another story. Coretta Scott King came to one of the luncheons. She talked about the value of civil disobedience and one of the women -- I think it might have been Helen Joseph, one of the great heroes of the anti-apartheid movement -- said, "We have tried that. It didn't work. This isn't the United States. It doesn't work here." I don't know if Mrs. King understood the truth of that statement.

That same day during the luncheon I went into our living room to get a match to light the candles on a birthday cake for Martin Luther King's sister. There was a man sitting there obviously listening to what was being said. I asked him, "Do you have a match and who are you?"

He said, "Oh, I am just with the delegation." Earlier in the day I had read in the newspaper about a notorious South African security agent that had been attached to the King delegation and seen his photo, but I didn't make the connection then. In the middle of the night I sat up and said, "Ken, you know who that was." My husband complained to the Embassy about permitting that kind of person to accompany Coretta Scott King and come into our home?"

The women were willing to talk and they knew all too well that they could be heard or recorded or whatever. Yet they assumed the risk.

Q: It probably was partly that they were willing to take that risk.

BROWN: Yes.

Q: It sounds as if there was little or no self censorship in these conversations.

BROWN: There must have been some. Occasionally I would be told who had gone to Zambia to talk to the ANC. I'd hear bits and pieces, but they were things I wouldn't talk about in the house. If I wanted to talk about them with my husband, we would go for a walk. We didn't talk in our home about things that could put people in danger.

Q: You assumed the house was bugged.

BROWN: Yes. I always thought it must be voice activated and for that reason I was pleased we had and still have a very talkative African gray parrot.

Q: Recommended technique for living in repressive countries: have a parrot.

BROWN: We assumed our phones were tapped. I once got a semi-offensive call immediately after I had a phone conversation and the caller referred to what I had been talking about with a friend.

Q: Really?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: And when they call that's when they want you to know that they are listening to you.

BROWN: Yes, but the caller was pretty careful, nonetheless.

After we left post I spoke to a group of students from Georgetown who were about to go to South Africa. Rather than talking about what they would find in South Africa, I talked about risk. I told them that they were going to come home but they had to remember in every relationship and conversation they had they could put somebody at risk and they had to be more concerned about that than anything else. This surprised them, but it is true. People who were actively engaged in opposing apartheid assumed risk and many of them suffered for it.

I believe it was CBS that aired a program after we came back from South Africa called 'Children Under Apartheid'. They interviewed children, some as young as 12, including a young student leader my husband had known. Like many of our colleagues we talked to afterwards, we thought that CBS had put targets on those children's backs. Indeed, the young man that my husband knew was picked up at the airport in Johannesburg and found three days later shot in the back of the head, an execution. My husband had talked frequently with this young man and had told me: " They are not going to let him live very long" and they didn't.

Q: What does this say about the ethics of journalism, getting the story at all costs?

BROWN: I think part of it was a lack of comprehension of what the risk was. It was so enormous. I tried calling CBS that night and got nowhere.

Q: Too late. It had already been broadcast.

BROWN: During the time we were there, there were perhaps as many as 10,000 children in detention. These were children between the ages of eight and eighteen. Their names weren't published, parents didn't know where they were, and when the children were released, they were often given a rand and simply told to go. If they were incarcerated with the criminal population or in solitary, they suffered very greatly. Those who were with the political prisoners had some protection.

There is a women's association in South Africa called 'The Black Sash" which you probably know about. Just before one Christmas it invited parents of missing children to come to a meeting place in downtown Johannesburg. The Black Sash and other anti-apartheid groups had debriefed people as they were released from prison, asking them if they knew of child and other prisoners, and had listed the names of those they found out about on the walls on long sheets of paper. It was heartbreaking to see parents poring over the lists, looking for the names of their children.

Children often had psychological problems after detention. The head of the Black Consciousness movement there was a very impressive young man. Saths Cooper was a psychologist and received one of our human rights grants to provide psychological treatment for children who had been detained.

Q. Your contacts were all in the Johannesburg area?

BROWN: Not entirely. They were also in townships in other areas and in some of the homelands. The self help and human rights work was the most absorbing work I've ever had. I met an incredible range of people working against the system on the most basic level. We gave grants for labor, education, legal assistance, health and children's projects. One grantee was a theater group in Soweto that went to black spot (communities under threat of forced removal) to explain what to expect. The group acted out in the local language what actions the government could be expected to take against them.

Q: The grant system, I think, requires a committee to meet in the embassy and then people vote. I don't know if that's the way it was arranged in Johannesburg and then a coordinator carries forth the projects that have been selected by the committee. Did it work that way?

BROWN: Usually I wrote up the proposals and they were granted with some exceptions. One grant that was denied was one that would have funded a community planning program for a squatter camp outside of Johannesburg. Yet another grant was made to a young herbalist and sankoma, very much from the village, who wanted to gain the right to be a hawker on the streets of Johannesburg. We gave him a grant for legal representation and the case was decided in his favor. Then the right was extended to other communities. Years later I saw a picture of him in a three piece suit. He used to bring me presents of beads and porcupine quills.

Q: So just to recap a little bit, you had some reluctance to even go to this country and then within a year it sounds as though you were very much involved in the social changes. In fact, did it make you feel better about being in South Africa?

BROWN: Oh, yes. I felt very quickly that my husband was important because of what he chose to witness and report about. Being present, seeing firsthand what was happening, and being seen by the black communities and the government mattered.

Ken's attention to forced removals is an example. The purpose behind forced removal was to move people to a homeland, declare it independent and strip black South Africans of their nationality. People were to be kept to these areas, which were bleak and then allowed back into South Africa only as foreign labor.

Because of his opposition to forced removal, a chief near Johannesburg was brutally murdered. That same day Ken visited the family to show solidarity and demonstrate that the U.S. Government was watching. The family told Ken that the police had been called several times, but had stood on a nearby hill, watching the chief being hacked to death and burnt.

Ken had also talked to a teen aged boy who had just been released by black vigilantes. The vigilantes had hacked the boy with machetes and hung a tire filled with gasoline around his neck.

The vigilantes were prepared to shoot the boy or light the tire, a way of killing called "necklacing" when somebody recognized him and let him go. Ken said that he was haunted by the boy's face, still dazed and staring at death when he met him. And that was reflected in Ken's face when he came home.

Ken went to difficult places. He did a lot of reporting on apartheid, especially about black spot removal. That was very important.

Q: Do you think this inhibited the regime in some way, knowing there was a foreign diplomat from a major country observing very closely and reporting this? Did it inhibit them, do you think?

BROWN: It gave them pause, I think, when we visited a place targeted for removal. I know when Ambassador Perkins came and he and other western ambassadors went into Soweto for a major funeral, there was no violence. It made a difference.

Q: That was later.

BROWN: That was later. Diplomatic actions affect things, but I don't know how you can measure that.

Q: I am sure you cannot but we could say that this young man with the tire around his neck maybe survived because Ken was there.

BROWN: Not in that case, but it does help to shine a light on such misdeeds.

One of the women who came to the luncheons, a reporter, was in Soweto that day in 1976. The first child shot in Soweto, Hector Peterson, was put in her car. She raced to get him medical care, but he couldn't be saved. There is a famous picture of Hector Peterson being carried with his sister at his side.

Q: So this became someone you knew? This person with the car?

BROWN: Yes. She talked about it. It was amazing to hear the stories that people had to tell.

My friend Sebolelo Mohajane, for example, had been arrested and detained over time and at one evening over a beer she casually said, "I just got some new grill work put on my windows and it slants outwards so I guess if grenades are lobbed, they will just glance off."

Q: There is something macabre and humorous about this. Can you characterize the tone? You talk about their amazing stories. These are stories of hardship, of injustice. Was there sort of a humorous touch? What was uniquely South African about the way they told these stories?

BROWN: It differed. The English speaking white community generally had a very bleak attitude and little sense of humor. Nonetheless, people in the white community were courageous, particularly the women in the Black Sash and religious leaders.

Q: The Black Sash, at least in the beginning was entirely white, wasn't it?

BROWN: Yes, middle and upper-class white women had the protection of their husbands. Some of them suffered because of their involvement, but certainly black or colored or Indian women would have been much more at risk.

There was a lot of humor in the black community. When the government eased up on pass laws but tightened the screws on housing people would say, "Ah, I used to have to carry a pass and now I've got to carry a house."

One of the human rights grants was for a women's conference for black, colored and Indian women. Of course there were women there from the white community. There was humor even when discussing serious issues. At that time there was a lot of concern about birth control, whether it was state-mandated. Black women were given Depo-Provera shots without their knowledge.

Q: In effect to sterilize them.

BROWN: In effect, so there was a great deal of discomfort with birth control. There was a very heated discussion in one of the sessions and finally a Khosa woman wearing a blanket said "All this is well and good, but you've got to remember there is no apartheid between the blankets" and the crowd went wild, laughing and cheering. It was wonderful.

The parties in Soweto were fun.

Q: When you say there was less levity or no levity in the English speaking you are referring to the white women?

BROWN: I think mostly the men. They were pretty humorless.

Q: I think the point about the people enduring the most hardships being the most humorous is a powerful point.

BROWN: One subject that deserves more discussion is the role of the church in South Africa. It was the young people at Stellenbosch who first broke with the racial policies of the Dutch Reformed Church. Also, the churches in townships and rural areas were an amazing force. The ministers and priests sheltered and inspired people facing terrible circumstances. It was a real living religion.

Q: It wasn't in name only. It wasn't going through the patterns. There was a real zeal.
BROWN: Yes, a combination of belief and action, working to protect people and give them strength. People didn't talk about religion but they lived it. Their actions, their courage, their willingness to protect other people were really amazing.

A friend of ours was an Anglican Episcopal bishop in Soweto. His church was firebombed by security forces who didn't try to hide their identities. He rebuilt and carried on.

When Anglican Bishop Tutu was installed in Johannesburg a Catholic bishop participated in the ceremony. He had been released from detention and when he appeared there was a gasp from the crowd because everybody knew what had happened to him in prison. He had been tortured with electrodes on his genitals. He was tall and proud and had great courage. After Tutu was enthroned, the choirs in the balcony broke into wonderful singing and movement.

Q: Do you think the regime understood or failed to understand the force of the church as an instrument of social change?

BROWN: Probably, probably.

Q: Well, if they firebombed the church, I guess they understood.

BROWN: I think the Catholic bishops, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Anglicans, they were all important in the struggle.

Q: Did the regime fail to notice this? Were they inadvertent in allowing this to happen? Clearly it went against the regime.

BROWN: I don't know what the answer is to that. We gave a self-help grant to a Catholic priest in a small independent homeland. He was always in and out of detention and each time he was released, he called me to let someone know he was okay. Although the authorities were pretty rough on him, he stood up to them all alone.

Q: The self-help grants conventionally go to NGOs or community groups. But did these groups exist when you were there or were these grants done in an ad hoc way with people as the opportunity came up? In some countries the NGO has been there for a few years, they come to the embassy, they have a proposal. It sounds as though you nurtured them more in Johannesburg than is sometimes the case in some countries.

BROWN: I think it was a mix. There was a surprising number of NGOs there. Other proposals came from groups that had little organization or were outside of the usual.

As I mentioned before, there was a grant proposal for a squatter camp outside of Johannesburg that was not accepted. The camp was located on property that was a no man's land. The title wasn't clear. The camp contained a large group of people who were trying to develop a structure for their community, including a sanitation system and rules for how people were to use basic amenities, a basic social and governmental structure. I thought the proposal was exciting but the embassy turned it down.

At that time the human rights program was a political and not a USAID program, so it was more flexible and reactive than was the case later.

Another grant that was denied was one that would have provided funding for families of those being tried for treason to visit the trial once a month. Our consulate employees took up a contribution and we paid for the transportation.

In our final year, the human rights program became a USAID program.

We had funded legal assistance offices in a number of townships. This was a sensitive process, because each township had its own blend of political groups and tensions that had to be taken into consideration. USAID came in and said, "We are going to have a prototype" you know, like widgets. And I thought, "Oh no."

They said, "We are not going to do education." Legal offices had been done and done very well. Education was then sort of the cutting edge. We attended a hand-over meeting at the Embassy and I argued for some social, economic and educational projects that were being developed and what I thought was the cutting edge for us. The new head of USAID said, "That's what the Marxists do."

My husband wrote me a note saying, "Nobody here but us commies."

Q: This week is May 9th. This is a very controversial matter right now, a matter I am working on, which is Haiti where the U.S. government will not agree, the executive branch will not agree, to do education. The entire NGO community and the Congress are in direct conflict but this gets us off the theme. This was not some bizarre, drive-by comment.

BROWN: No, but Congress was also casting a heavy eye on everything South African.

Q: Maybe in a different way back then. That is an amazing comment.

BROWN: The conservatives came in great numbers.

Q. Oh, really? Because ten years later it was exactly the opposite. Everybody came. They supposedly had all been involved from the beginning in the struggle, which we know is not true. A lot of people took credit for things they never did.

The church; did you involve the church consciously or otherwise in your own activities? You say the church was a very, very effective agent in social change. You had 80 or 90 people come into your house every six weeks. Did you target church members at all?

BROWN: Not particularly. Among the guests there were some ministers' wives, including Else Naude, and women who worked for religious organizations, such as World Vision.

Q: You mentioned the dawn of USAID in the mid-80s.When I was there ten years later the whole rationale was that USAID gave no money to the regime. They gave all the money to NGOs and to communities, pretty much in opposition to the regime. Can you comment on that because this must have been a bit dicey, doing programs in areas that the regime did not like.

BROWN: Yes.

Q: Tell us about that. Were there risks? I don't know if there were risks to you but maybe to some of the grantees?

BROWN: I think there may have been.

Q: The regime must have been unhappy at least to see the types of activities you were doing.

BROWN: They tolerated it. I never really understood why.

Q: Why do you think they did? To avoid international embarrassment, or out of laziness, or did they feel that these programs were of little importance?

BROWN: I think they felt that they could pull it in at any time. There were a couple of people who were on the run who were grantees. I had to arrange to meet them somehow. One came to the house and I was nervous about him being seen or caught in our neighborhood, where he stood out.

Q: Not allowed to be there.

BROWN: Essentially. I believed that it was important for the human rights program to be a political program, one that could react quickly and be flexible as events and

organizations developed and new leaders emerged. The USAID process isn't nimble, flexible, or easy to maneuver, but Washington and Congress wanted to strictly control the grants.

Q: So in fact was the money transferred out of the ambassador's fund into a USAID fund?.

BROWN: I believe so, but that happened after we left.

Q: The USAID program was of much greater magnitude than the Ambassador's self-help fund. The latter are small amounts of money, but you can implement them very quickly.

BROWN: I think there was a $10,000 limit for any human rights grant at that time, very small. The self-help fund provided even smaller grants.

Q: When USAID come in ten years later, they had a hundred million dollars. So that is a huge contrast.

BROWN: That wouldn't have been just for human rights grants. There would have been other kinds of programs, such as housing.

Q: Was the self-help program there as long as you were?

BROWN: Yes. That stayed with the ambassador The human rights program went to USAID.

Q. How did you and your husband work together?

BROWN: I have been fortunate because my husband has always treated me as a partner. We worked as a team. In South Africa this worked quite well. His brief was the townships, black politics, labor unions, the liberal media, and also minerals and commerce. He dealt with people who were leaders of organizations for the most part, not exclusively by any means, and the people I dealt with were grassroots.

So together we were able to bring a wide range of people together and accomplish things that otherwise would not have been possible. For example, Saths Cooper, the head of Black Consciousness movement, wouldn't deal with Americans on an official level but did work with me on a project to get psychological treatment for children released from detention. When Congressman Stephen Solarz wanted to meet him, he refused an invitation to do so from the consulate general. I asked him and he came to our house and met with the congressman. Then I suggested that he apply for a Fulbright. He did and he went to the United States. Again, it was because we had a working relationship.

Q: What you were doing, there aren't that many political officers that get involved in that. That is sometimes what public diplomacy does. The more enlightened political officers do this and there aren't too many that actually get to the point of influencing

people's lives. Many political officers, I think, see themselves as analysts, not as activists. I think this is a great history and a great partnership that you have with your husband. You were grassroots, he then using that not only to analyze and interpret but to actually be part of what was happening. I think that is remarkable.

BROWN: South Africa was just an amazing experience for us both. It changed us. I had never met so many people with such courage, amazing people. We had friends who had been under house arrest for 22 years. The husband had been very active in the Indian Congress and the wife, Amina Cachalia, is still alive. She was one of the leaders of the women's march to Pretoria to protest the imposition of pass laws on women. They were not allowed to see more than one person at a time. They had their house split into two and each lived in one half of the house so that they each would have the opportunity to see their children one at a time. Occasionally people would shoot at their doors and windows.

Q: Some years later as the change became more and more rapid and history went to the side of change, I think you have to remember that at this time in the mid-'80s nobody thought that anything would change. The courage was enormous, given that it wasn't courage with a reward that was apparent, that in fact most people's appraisal was this will never change, I think. Is that the way you remember?

BROWN: I think people hoped and believed it would happen and felt that things were changing but there would be violence. The fact that there wasn't, is really significant.

Q: How did South Africa avoid the violence which everyone expected? You were not there in '93 – '94 when everyone thought that all hell would break loose and it did not.

BROWN: Much was due to the extraordinary character and leadership of Nelson Mandela. Another reason again was faith. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission institutionalized forgiveness and allowed people to move forward. It was remarkable that people could forgive someone who had killed their children. I don't know where else this could happen, but I think it is due to a living faith that people have there.

Q: And then the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a structure also where faith could express itself. Without the structure, who knows what might have happened in terms of people able to function having been through trauma?

BROWN: We had lunch one day with a man who had been on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and we mentioned my friend Sebolelo. He said, "We are investigating her death to see if it was not an accident." This shook both of us. I don't know if I could forgive a person if murder were to be proven the case.

Q: You were very, very close friends when you were there in '84 to '87. Was she killed during that period?

BROWN: No, after that. She had come and visited us in DC and I had seen her one more time after that. She was apparently blindsided by a car. It wasn't uncommon for people to be purposely forced off the road.

Q: You were talking about the contacts that you had as a team, the ConGen and the spouse of the ConGen.

BROWN: I think it worked well for us there and then later on in Ghana.

Q: I would like to draw out some more of the anecdotes because these are amazing stories. Eighty people in your home, a safe haven so to speak where people could express themselves, and certainly not in large groups to that extent outside the home of a foreigner. I don't know if these conversations could have taken place anywhere but in your house.

BROWN: They couldn't meet elsewhere because of the terms of the states of emergency. I don't know what conversations were held on the margins.

Q: But here you had large groups of people. I think that must have been unique.

BROWN: Yes, but there were risks. People knew that what they said could be and probably would be reported back by someone.

Q: As it was the time you saw the fellow sitting in the hallway.

BROWN: Ken was really disturbed by that. It shouldn't have happened.

Q: When something like that happens, whom do you complain to, the police?

BROWN: This man was notorious in South Africa. He was a police spy and maybe the last person you would expect to be sitting in one's living room. In my view, the embassy was responsible. It didn't exercise due diligence when it permitted him to be attached to the delegation.

Q. That's an important detail. I didn't know that the embassy would have blessed that.

What about the different tendencies at the embassy? In some countries in conflict regions you have groups within the embassy of different opinions: old guard, new guard, opposed to change, in favor of change. Did this happen or was there any difference between the people posted in Pretoria, perhaps and the people in Johannesburg? Was this circumstance or was it the nature of the people involved do you think?

BROWN: The embassy and consulates were separate universes. Johannesburg was involved with the black communities and black politics. My husband, as well as the political and labor officers, was out in an engaged with those communities.

Political officers in Pretoria dealt primarily with the government and Afrikaans community.

I think it is fair to say that some in the embassy regarded the government and anti-apartheid movement quite differently. We went to Pretoria fairly frequently for events. Early on I heard one officer in Pretoria making racist comments. Had he worked for Ken, he would have been on the next plane out.

Much depends on the ambassador. Ambassador Nickel, although he had some very good qualities, had little contact with the black community. His successor, Ambassador Ed Perkins on the other hand, was a much needed change.

Q: So you said different universes between the staff in Pretoria and the staff in Johannesburg. Were the ones in Pretoria more accepting of this regime and its injustices or did they even maybe support it?

BROWN: I can't answer that in all fairness. I know in Johannesburg and I think also in Durban and Cape Town there was much more contact and sympathetic with the anti-apartheid movement.

Q: There was more contact.

BROWN: Yes, but there were other differences, as well. There was always this feeling of urgency in Johannesburg. My husband said that I was a state of emergency junkie. We'd go on leave and I would worry about what might happen to this person or that person. This may be accurate, but I understood that there was a higher differential for Johannesburg than there was for Pretoria because of the stress.

Q: I think it is true and, again, years later I was told that in previous days the differential was high not because of crime, not because of other things, but the psychological stress of being in a conflictive situation. That's what I was told.

BROWN: Our people also went into situations that could be dangerous. When I went into Soweto, a paraplegic center would send out a scout to tell me which was the best way to get to where I was going. One didn't have trouble with the young "comrades". The fear was being caught between the army and people they were after. The army was composed of young men who were frightened and sometimes did things they shouldn't. That was the potential for getting hurt, not being roughed up by the comrades.

We had a friend who was a principal in a high school in Soweto. One day a group of soldiers -- young and green -- came to her school for no apparent reason. They went into her office and by the time they began leaving, hundreds of students had lined the walkway leading to their vehicles. These were nervous young soldiers with guns, surrounded by students angered by the show of force. Our friend got hit in the head with a stone, but the crowd of students let the soldiers go in peace. It could have turned bad.

Another time Sebolelo took me to a meeting of school counselors and teachers in Soweto. They talked about their role in teaching or helping their students become self- actualizing and to stand up for themselves, all the time knowing that when the children walked out the door they would walk smack into the face of all kinds of danger. Making judgments about their role had to be very difficult. They were giving their students the very tools that could put them in danger.

Q: Did you find they had courage? We talked about that. Did you also find they had a pragmatic sense of how to make something positive out of a crazy situation?

BROWN: I think they wanted to prepare the young people to be as much as they could be in that society, with the hope it would change enough so that they could really become full members of society.

Q: In the rest of the world, there was much militancy, much activism to try to get changes happening. At the same time, again from the outside at that time, it seemed to me very few people outside of South Africa thought that it would ever change, although many people wanted it to. I think your anecdotes imply that some of the people there did believe that change was coming.

BROWN: Oh, I think so. It was complicated. For example, the comrades wanted to shut education down so children who wanted to be educated had to run the gauntlet.

Two students stayed with us for a couple of months while they studied for their exams. They had little chance of success. They sat for a chemistry exam never having been in a lab. And the set piece for literature was <u>The Great Gatsby</u>.

Q: Something remote from everyday life. Like Milton or something. <u>The Great Gatsby</u> which is hardly a reference point for an African, South African, who couldn't have had any experience, anything comparable to <u>The Great Gatsby</u>, no point of reference.

BROWN: I was in schools that had fewer books than I have cookbooks.

Q: Yes, so even the dearth of materials.

BROWN: Another area that struck me was the health of children. I visited a number of farm schools in the peri-urban area and I had never seen as much kwashiorkor, or severe malnutrition as there, not even in Central Africa. I think it was because people couldn't move. Essentially farm workers were indentured so they couldn't get up and go to where there would be better food and conditions for their children.

During the time we were there, South Africa stopped reporting on the health of black children. The UN, however, came out with a study showing that 85% of rural black children were below UN height and weight standards. And many fell into the stunted growth category. Children weren't being educated and their power of learning was drastically affected.

Hunger was used as a weapon by the government. While we were there, the government tried to move a small group of Ndebele to a homeland and it was starving them out, literally. An organization called Operation Hunger brought in food and water until the government stopped it from doing so.

The Ndebele women do wonderful beadwork. The women make beaded aprons for children, for girls when they are maidens and when they get married, and for other life events. When conditions got tough, women began selling their work, their patrimony, to buy food. Operation Hunger was an honest broker for this in contrast to collectors who took advantage, buying the aprons for next to nothing.

There are different estimates of how many people over a period of 20 or 30 years were forcibly removed, taken from their farms, their villages and businesses and moved to the homelands. The process was a difficult one for us to understand. There were a number of black spots under threat when we were there, a few of which we visited.
The government would try to cajole, persuade and threaten the leaders of the communities into moving voluntarily, sometimes putting in its own leaders. There were all kinds of psychological methods used against people and then – if the government decided to go forward - the helicopters and trucks would come in and take people away and the neighboring white farmers would buy the livestock and whatever was left.

Mathopestadt was a farming community under threat while we were there. What was really chilling was that the government had come in and painted a number on each door. Of course it makes you think of Nazi Germany and the Star of David. The theater group that I talked about earlier came to the community to tell people about what to expect. Generally, the final move against a community took place when soldiers came in by helicopter.

When Ted Kennedy came, he got rushed and decided to visit Mathopestadt by helicopter. This terrified people and it was – to say the least – unthinking.

Q: Did he understand that?

BROWN: I don't know if he did. We later talked to his aide about it.

We travelled to settlement areas where people were slated to go. At one Betsey Spiro, our political officer, said, "You are going to have less than ten minutes here." So we took off in different directions and, sure enough, the authorities were there within ten minutes to kick us out. The relocation area was basically composed of drop toilets.

Some resettlement areas had nothing but rows of drop toilets, nothing else. And people were expected to live there. One could recognize a homeland by the environmental degradation. South Africa had lush beautiful agricultural land; the homelands and resettlement areas looked like moonscapes. Generally the resettlement camps were constructed just outside the borders of the homelands and then incorporated in and at that

point, people became citizens of an independent homeland and they were no longer South Africans. We visited a large resettlement camp in the Orange Free State. It was a place of enormous poverty, with a huge cemetery filled with children who had died of malnutrition and of course prostitution. What do women do in that situation? It was shocking to see.

We visited a homeland called Qua Qua. There were Israeli and Taiwanese firms there that had free and unregulated use of any labor. People had no recourse if they became sick or injured. There was no labor code, not even the most rudimentary one.

The head of Operation Hunger once told me: "If I have to choose between feeding a grandmother or her grandchildren, I feed the grandmother." The reason was that grandmothers often had been domestic workers and their small pensions were what keep people alive.

Q: They had passports that were recognized in no country except South Africa, right? They were citizens of countries that were unrecognized.

BROWN: We couldn't go into independent homelands.

Q: Because of U.S. policy?

BROWN: Yes. We could go into dependent ones.

Q: That may have been a good thing.

BROWN: Yes, I think it was except we needed to see what's happening.

Q: You said it was hard to understand the resettlement. Do you mean that it was hard to understand why the regime would do such a thing? Was it in fact against their own interests to disperse people? It seems logical that the regime in order to perpetuate itself would denationalize groups, divide and rule or whatever. What was it that was difficult to understand? That people could be so mean?

BROWN: The process of softening up a community is what I didn't understand, the rationale for that, the kind of psychological intimidation that went on before finally forcibly moving people.

Q: So it was the process that was very detailed, very systematic and kind of mysterious. Is that what you are saying?

BROWN: It was sadistic, I must say. You can understand, although not condone, wanting to keep people available for certain specific kinds of labor. The process was contorted. The Zulu homeland, for example, was composed of 19 scattered small areas.

Q: You also mentioned the time you went to see one of the resettlement camps and the political officer said, "You have ten minutes," knowing that the police would come. Can you describe the scene? Were these places supposedly off limits to the embassy?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: So when you went to see these places the South African authorities had said, "Don't go there." What was it that made you decide you could go there without actually being in terrible danger? You could be arrested? What was the worst that could happen?

BROWN: I don't think we felt in physical danger. We just wanted to see as much as we could.

Q: And the time you went, indeed they came in ten minutes. Can you describe?

BROWN: We were told to leave and so we said, "Right, we are out of here." We didn't give them any trouble. We just left. But they knew they were under observation.

Q: You went into an area where people had been resettled.

BROWN: They hadn't been resettled there yet. They were going to be.

Q: Where did the policemen come from? You went and then they came, is that right?

BROWN: Our car must have been noticed or followed. Generally the way they constructed those resettlement camps, they would be intended for one ethnic group and another ethnic group would be the builders for that. It is like Soweto; Soweto used to be pretty well mixed up and then the government forced people into separate townships within Soweto according to their ethnicity.

Q: Divide and rule.

BROWN: Divide and rule.

Q: You mentioned the word 'comrades'. I think ironically. I think you are referring to political activists who wanted to have nothing at all to do with the system and actually discouraged or intimidated people from going to school because going to school was a certain acceptance. Tell me about these comrades. What were they like?

BROWN: I didn't have much contact with them. I heard stories about them. They could be fairly rough with people.

Q: Were they a large number? Were they a strong minority of people? Were they bullies?

BROWN: Yes, they wanted to force their will on people. I am not the best person to answer that because I dealt with people who wanted to engage in different ways.

One time I went into Alexandra which was a little township north of Johannesburg. Talk about bleak and pitted. There was a wonderful clinic there where babies were born onto newsprint, which is sterile. There had been some sniping, so the group I was to visit got the comrades to provide a specially marked car so I could have safe passage. It did. I didn't think that anybody would be interested in shooting me anyway, because there was no advantage to that, but I must admit I was a little relieved when I got in and I got out. The visit was uneventful.

Q: So they had to go to the comrades who were opposed to all these activities and get their consent?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: So you were there from '84 to '87?

BROWN: Yes.

Q: Let's relive this in sequence. Ken was consul general. You met an individual in Soweto. With this individual you created an informal group, but it became a regular meeting and it always met at your house. How did things progress? You were there three years. Did you see any difference in your own presence in the community during those three years, or did you detect shifts in the country? It is a pretty narrow slice historically, but from beginning to end of your three years, how did you think things changed? Both for you and the community?

BROWN: Personal contact for American diplomats is always important. I think the way the American community in Johannesburg interacted with people in townships was very important. It takes a while for people to trust you and share their thoughts with you.

Our progress was reflected to some extent by the growing range of people who were willing to come to our home. More radical and conservative people came over time.

Q: I am guessing this had to do with your own personal approach and your acceptance of people of different types.

BROWN: Orrin Hatch came with a very conservative delegation once and we had dinner with him. During the conversation about apartheid, I felt I was in a different universe. Anyway, I asked the three or four women in his party to come to a luncheon. It must have been a real culture shock for them because they heard women talk about apartheid in ways they would never have heard any place else.

Q: It sounds as if the congress in the mid-'80s was almost the exact opposite of the congress in the mid-'90s. In the mid-'90s the Congress was demanding, not everybody, but a good number of congressmen, a boycott of South Africa.

BROWN: There were liberals who came through and a lot of very conservative, think tank types. Every once in a while Pat Buchanan would write a speech for Reagan and I'd think that any advance that we had made in dealing with the black communities was getting wiped out.

Q: What was the logic of the congressmen and the politicians and the think tanks in the U.S. who opposed change? Did they think change wasn't possible? Were they informed about what was happening?

BROWN: I don't think most Americans knew much about the South Africa system or wanted to know. They realized that it was a bad system, a cruel system, but there wasn't much sophistication as far as what apartheid was like, because it was a system like no other and the regime appeared to be so Western in nature. And perhaps they were comfortable with a ruling class of prosperous white men. There were, however, lots of people who visited who supported change.

Again, I think it was important for the consulate to educate people and expose them to what was happening. Ken really worked to report on black spot removal and put it in real human terms.

Q: To educate visitors, you mean?

BROWN: To educate visitors, yes. Nancy Kassebaum came.

Q: A relatively enlightened person.

BROWN: Yes and the staff would have died for her. She was just wonderful. There were others like that too.

Leaders matter in terms of what people report about and what kinds of contacts are encouraged. Ed Perkins came at the end of our tour, but you could tell it was going to be a new time.

Q: It's a pity you didn't have more time with Ed Perkins, I think.

Another question in passing about the internal culture of the consulate and of the embassy. You mentioned that other people accompanied you and sometimes went in these supposedly forbidden places or they joined you in these group activities. Did you feel that others accompanied you in every sense or did you feel you were a vanguard with nobody there? Did you feel there was a community of Americans at the consulate or the embassy who had the same beliefs and the same wishes that you did?

BROWN: I think so, I think it made it easier for people because of what Ken and I believed and did.

Q: Ah, in fact you led the others.

BROWN: I took a group of women from the embassy and consulate into Soweto for a tea and some of them were very nervous, asking about what could happen and what should they wear. I told them not to worry, anything they wore would be outshone by the hats there alone. That was the case and everyone had a great time.

Q: What do you think they were nervous about? Actual security?

BROWN: I think because of the unknown.

Q: But this was familiar turf to you.

BROWN: For the most part, not always. Ken said he often got nervous when I went into townships. I never had any trouble. And I always avoided the military.

Q: Did the military avoid you?

BROWN: I don't know. The young soldiers were pretty raw.

Q: You described them as afraid.

BROWN: They were vastly outnumbered.

Q: Got it, got it. Things could turn against them. I am guessing that if they saw a foreign diplomatic mission vehicle, they'd just as soon not have trouble.

BROWN: If they knew what it was.

Q: They may not recognize one from the other. The ConGen does not go with the flag, right? It has to be the chief of mission?

BROWN: He sometimes flew a consular flag.

Q: These are really valuable reflections and recollections.

Would you have done any of it differently? Would you have done it quicker or would you have done it with full cannons blasting? The pace of the activities that you engaged in, looking back, are you satisfied with what you did?

BROWN: It was a rich personal time largely because of the amazing women I got to know. We had one last lunch to say good-bye. People made little speeches and Helen Joseph told the crowd that she didn't have many talents, so she stood up and sang "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean". I can show you pictures of our laughing faces when she was doing that. She was a hero of mine. I treasure that memory.

I think I may have helped the image of America and I know my husband did.

Q: What about that image needed to be helped? Were we previously seen as indifferent, arrogant? How did that image need to be changed and how did you manage to do it?

BROWN: We needed to focus on the black communities, become a presence in those communities, and give our people the kind of information they needed to make better decisions about policy towards South Africa.

Q: If I were to say, "I am going to threaten you unless you take some credit; I am going to demand you take some credit for some achievements". Without making them up, what were your achievements? I am not sure you are taking the credit that you should take. I want to put it on the record here. I think you did some remarkable things and I want to know what they were.

BROWN: Bringing women together and having an open welcoming home was important. Also, I managed two or three hundred grants of different sorts, some of which were very valuable. And, I supported my husband, who was a real agent for change in many important ways.

Q: And you had a legal background. You went to law school.

Do you remember where you were and what your reaction was the day that Mandela was released and on the day of the elections in 1994? How did you feel?

BROWN: There had been several false starts. In fact, we were in Soweto one night and somebody said Mandela has been released and one could feel the excitement, but it wasn't true. I was elated when Mandela was released. The day of the election, when there were people stretched single file up and down over hills waiting to vote, was really something. It was really something to see.

Q: Did you feel you were a part of that? I don't know where you were at the time.

BROWN: I think I cry every time I see Mandela talk. In fact, we went to a theater production at the Studio Theater, a one-woman show in which the actress played 20 or 30 different South African parts. The main character was a black domestic worker in a white household. At one point she learns that her daughter was one of the children killed in Soweto. I started to cry and couldn't stop.

It was an exciting and moving time when we were in South Africa. People were working to build institutions and a better future. People were brave, they were prosecuted and persecuted.

And there were people that we loved very much and still see. Amina Cachalia, for example, visited a couple of years ago and we took her to Holocaust Museum. There is now an apartheid museum in South Africa. And there are ironies. We adopted a little South African girl who is biracial. I took her to register for school when we returned from

South Africa. A school official asked what her race was. I told him that she came from South Africa and we had had enough of classification. (Pinkie had originally been classified as black and later as Colored.) He said, "You do it or I'll do it, lady."

Q: Wow, there you were. Back at square one, so to speak.

Was this DC public schools?

BROWN: Yes. I think South Africa deeply affected everybody who served there.

Q: In your case it seems to have worked both ways. It had a deep effect on you and I think you had a deep effect on people there.

BROWN: I hope so, I hope so. It was a fascinating, emotional and rewarding tour.

Q: Bonnie Brown, thank you for this remarkable interview.

End of interview