

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

VIRGINIA PETERSON

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mrs. Peterson]

Q: That would be the 20th anniversary plus one. Maybe we'll get to comment on that point. Mrs. Peterson: the point of this interview is to get to know something about you - your background, education and, your career. And working towards interaction that you've had with the United States and what affect that might have had in your professional development. First – can you give us an encapsulation of your background, education, and what took you to social work?

PETERSON: In South Africa during the 70's, as a result of apartheid, very few opportunities were available to young women wanting to be in the humanities, so to say. You either had to go and teach, and we had enough of those in my family, actually an oversupply of teachers. Or you could become a nurse or a social worker; I chose to be the second social worker in our family. So we'd the first, and I must say that that's where it stopped; it must be the hard work. I was an only child born in Weinberg, it's a middle income neighborhood. Frank would know more about that neighborhood, and surprisingly Frank was a librarian at the local library.

Q: That was before his employment at the American mission.

PETERSON: Yes. I was an avid reader and my father had qualified as an educator as a teacher. But because he refused to teach Afrikaans, which he saw as the language of the oppressor, he never taught despite qualifying.

Q: The only option at the time was to teach and Afrikaans being the media of discussion?

PETERSON: Yes. Because we were colored, and by being colored in Cape Town, everybody assumed you should be able to speak Afrikaans very well. I must say I've learned over the last couple of years that during my formative years, my father banned Afrikaans as a language anywhere near my home. He felt that strongly about it. So that led me to become a lot more conscious about what his issues were. He spoke to me a lot about his friends at the time, Richard Van Der Ross, who later became the rector at the University of Western Cape. They had qualified together in education, and he said that some people chose to, because that is what they chose to do. But also parents compelled them because they needed income in the family, and he (my father) felt he could do other things to bring an income into our home, so he didn't have to be compelled to teach. I

suppose that's where my political awareness first started, as a child, and the fact that I was my father's only student, that made life very difficult for me because he read, and I read, and I probably read books far beyond my age at the time. So Frank Sassman saw me quite a lot at the library. I was in there at least twice a week; I didn't do as much homework as I read. I understood the value of that, in addition to all the other things that my father told me. My mother was from a rural place, and they sent me to a convent school where I challenged the Irish nuns about understanding their circumstances back home in Ireland and to draw some parallels with oppression of one group over another for various reasons. But ours because of race and why were they not fight alongside us. So I was fighting from school already, and by the time I got to high school, I knew that my life had to be directed in a way of someone who wanted to make a difference. So I went and practiced social work at the University of the Western Cape, and I currently hold a Masters degree in social science, law degree from the University of Cape Town, and currently busy with a PhD at the same university, looking at youth and social capital. In terms of my work experience, I worked in welfare organizations until I realized, as I tell students today that the money we got in welfare organizations at that time was a government subsidy, so the apartheid government had a stick over welfare in a way, and the minute I started disagreeing and raising the issues of inequality at work, I got branded as being a troublesome worker. As soon as I was able to find a job in a different sector that still allowed me to do social work, I worked in a trade union.

Q: You were in, as you described, a wealthy organization?

PETERSON: No, it was about child welfare, and yes it was wealthy. It had a lot of support from the wealthy because it dealt with children, but in a paternalistic way. It would not recognize that colored children who were receiving assistance would only get half of what whites were getting, and if they were African, it was one rand, and they refused to accept that I should raise those issues and just do what I had to do.

Q: Was this a public or a subsidized private organization?

PETERSON: Yes, a subsidized private organization. At that time, I did not work for the government. I even refused to work for the government and even the subsidized organization in 1983. I had gone abroad to Europe for a year and to the States on a visit – and saw that people would live in harmony and mix with people from the ANC (African National Congress) in London. I was further driven to try and do something, and when I came back home in 1985, I was working for a Trade Union Organization, who was doing more with politics than labor if you understand that. COSATU was formed in 1986, which made us even more militant, and while I was social worker I was a social working at a trade union, which, being my canvas, allowed me to say I would not tolerate this indignity or this unequal treatment. I continued to work at the trade union until 1990 with the unbanning and the twenty years that we now celebrate. I then went back into organized welfare.

Q: When you say unbanning, were you banned?

PETERSON: No, the unbanning of organizations that I, because I told you in 1981, I had been to London and met with people in the ANC there who were in exile and continued to have contact, as difficult as it was, but also start a formations here. I was one of the founding members of the Social Workers Forum which was an alternative to traditional and organized welfare, moving towards change. And I was involved in the placard demonstrations and all those things that we did at the time, and organized, careered and I was a part of the political scenario in that way. Then 1994 came, and because I worked in the ANC welfare department, helping with drafting policy for change in the welfare section particularly, contributed to the reconstruction and development document in that process at the policy conferences that we had in 1993 in the ANC. People always remember the leadership conferences in the ANC, they don't always remember the policy conferences.

Q: Where the work gets done.

PETERSEN: Yes. Because the work gets done, and I am a work person. That is what I contributed to. I declined, although nominated in the 1994 elections and in 1999 to stand as in for political office. I declined on the basis that I wanted to be a worker for change. I didn't want to be on the back bench debating it; I actually wanted to be a part of the change.

Q: You felt that people in political office were actually-

PETERSON: No, not all. There were the executive decision makers, and then there were obviously people, depending on where your name was on the list who formed part of the legislatures of parliament. But they would be part of committees; I wanted to do the work that changed where we were coming from.

Q: Now, we both have heard about 1994, was this before or after the elections?

PETERSON: Before the election, I was in the ANC already, and I worked on the welfare desk of the ANC, and while I had a job, I also did that work, which was after hours, in townships listening to people, asking then what changes they wanted to bring about, and together with Vivian Taylor at the time, we put most of the inputs into the policy document, we called it the Yellow Book and the Red Book, various reasons to take it from welfare to social development because both of us were development specialists.

Q: The hard work that you did at that time in developing these documents, did you feel that in the short run or in the long run, that your ideas were implemented?

PETERSON: Yes, I very definitely in the RDP, the minute we got into I was deployed. You know we have a deployment. In 1994, when I was working for SHAWCO -which was the largest run student health and welfare organization at the time. The ANC found me after the election and said "You are going tomorrow, like tomorrow to report to Wells Street at the provincial government and you are going to go to the New MEC, which is the provincial minister for welfare and health, and you are going to help him set up office

and you are going to sort things out. Go!” And my husband said to me “What about your job?” They said “We’ll talk to your people and they can second you. This is the government; we are the government. We need your help. You must go.” So I went. I was very duty bound and obedient.

Q: Did you find the minister receptive to your ideas?

PETERSON: Absolutely, I mean he was the youngest one they had. But, I knew him before in the province. Because we had worked together; I had been in the ANC in our branch, Vice Chair and Treasurer, so I could call people to come and speak during the campaign. So I would call Trevor Manuel, Ebrahim Rasool, who then became the premier afterwards. So when they send me to Ebrahim Rasool’s office, we first laughed a little bit, and I said “You know, I am not sure you don’t, you only have a driver. You don’t have someone making the tea, am I making tea for you?” and he said no, he didn’t think so. And I said, “Okay today I’ll answer the phones right, and tomorrow I’ll be your communications person. But when visitors come, I can also make tea and coffee, I can do that too. But I am not so good when it comes to cleaning the office; I think we’re going to need someone for that.” So we walked into this government, and there was not a piece of paper there, nothing!

Q: What city?

PETERSON: In Cape Town, the provincial government of Western Cape. Walked in through the door, there wasn’t a piece of paper he fortunately had his writing block, and was trying to answer the phone. So I said “Can you stop answering the phone? You are a provincial minister, an MEC, and a member of the executive council. I’ll answer phones.” I became his media liaison from that day; I became anything that was required from a person, where there was just a driver and myself to start up the office. So I had to do recruitment, set up his office, and then I took my documents because then the other people that I worked with in ANC said “No, no. You must not do those other jobs. You must look at who is there, and what we need to do because you have work to do.” I said, “I’ll do that too; I’ll multitask; I’ll handle those things.” So I started this struggle towards change, and it was an uncomfortable year. We were called strategic SMTs, the ANC deployed people to assist in the setting up of offices.

Q: Strategic?

PETERSON: Strategic Management Teams, so I headed the Strategic Management Team, until I could find someone for health. I became the health and welfare one, and then I found Doctor Felipe Abdullah, and he became the health person, so I could share some of my work. We had, ourselves, in these offices and the department in another street. And they were just in the end of the department over when the minister called. So I looked at them, these strange people, these new people. But they understood very quickly that I understood, and some people knew me because I had been in the sector before. So yeah, and two years on, that was 1994, the first year I did the Strategic Management Team, wrote documents, transformation documents, lots of it. I took the ANC’s

documents and converted them into programs. Multipurpose centers was one of those programs that were in the RDP program. Looking at early childhood care and development; those were some of the issues and obviously looking at social security because you know that we had a stratified based on race.

Q: Limited resources suddenly had to cover the 80 percent?

PETERSON: Exactly, but that was a struggle. For example, we found a lack of old age homes for the elderly. But 98 percent of them were for white people, and you had two percent of them for colored, and nothing for African people. They blamed that on culture, but didn't take into account that they would also need something. Because that is how they defended it.

Q: Resources. Yes.

PETERSON: Early childhood care, white children would get 12 rand a day, colored children would get four rand a day, and African children would get one rand a day. So this is what I was confronted with. Well after a year of doing the Strategic Management, working on strategy, and taking him out to meet people and to the issues, I was able to jump straight in for him as an MEC. So built him a profile too quickly. He was young, but bolted anyways; he became the Premier afterwards, in this province. We worked well together as a team. I understood the politics, and then after a year I was appointed by the provincial government of National Unity; there were still NNP guys running the Western Cape, so here in this krill from the old New National Party was the Premier. But they appointed me as head of Social Development after a year, and it was actually two years after that I went on my trip to the States.

Q: Now, appointed in 1995-6?

PETERSON: Yes, July '95, I got appointed as the head of Social Development in the provincial government. And was that for 12 years.

Q: Ok, so someone found you very quickly at the American consulate. Maybe Frank? I don't know.

PETERSON: Yes, I think a few people. Fortunately, because I had a boss who had a profile, which was helpful. So we moved rather quickly; we raised issues of inequality. We were working fast, with all the needs and the challenges we faced.

Q: It sounds as if your trip to the States came at the perfect time?

PETERSON: Well, first of all I thought it wasn't so perfect because I had just had a hysterectomy and I felt I had been away from work a long time already. And it was troubling that I had to be away from work, so I asked them for the shortest stay as my first request. But it came in the nick of time for some of my service delivery challenges, in a way. Head Start: I was very concerned about early childhood education, and I was

fortunate on that trip to focus on the Head Start Program. The other program we struggled with was I took my top-end challenges, and was looking, constantly looking. Young people in trouble with the law, and looked at that as well. And I got in contact with people in my sector at Howard University. Up until today, I still have that contact, and I have been back several times as a guest lecturer or as a speaker at conferences on issues on substance abuse.

Q: Little details. Were you on an individual grant?

PETERSON: It was an individual grant.

Q: So the program was tailored for you?

PETERSON: Yes, it was tailored for my needs because I said to them, “No, no, no. Hang on. If I am going anywhere, it must have a purpose.” So these are the things I am looking to want to see, and I talked about substance abuse, juvenile detention, care etc. what was that, and what do you do about it? Women’s programs, children’s programs, particularly ECD, which is early childhood development. That’s how I got to Head Start. And then to meet service professionals in the welfare sector.

Q: Did any of these things that you saw take you by surprise?

PETERSON: This scale and what you consider to be not well-resourced did freak me out. I mean come on. “What do you mean? This is not well resourced. “ I mean, how – this is heaven! A case worker with a 120 cases, you’ll never find that here.

Q: What was the load in South Africa at that time?

PETERSON: Oh my gosh, it was 300-400. It was ridiculous. I learned that 60 was a goal because you all had something at the more severe cases, and he only had like 30. What? You can literally do it one day a month, work Saturday and Sundays, and do it one day per month. One person, you can go back next month to the same person and for a revisit.

Q: What types of cases, juvenile or-?

PETERSON: It was family cases, since I was interested in families, and different family scenarios. In South Africa we are confronted with very many different definitions of the word family. So family strengthening programs.

Q: So when you were in the US, did you find that the training you had had in South Africa was of an international standard?

PETERSON: Yes it was because we used your books. We did. The four P’s of Helen Perlman. It was British and American literature that I had been exposed to in my training.

Q: So seeing the things you saw in the US really brought in what you had learned theoretically in a concrete way?

PETERSON: Yes, because you see, in South Africa, the theory was “up there” and the practice was “down there”. I had always struggled with the merging of theory and practice. And there I could see it, and I could see why they could write these books which we called our “little Bibles”. You could see the practice and theory come together, and it was no longer the distance that I was having to cope with.

Q: As an American, I am trying to adapt to what you are saying because we often think in America that our social problems are intractable...

PETERSON: Yes, they look like that, but at least you have made strides. But you don't always recognize them because, you are able to service more people more thoroughly, but you don't see that. Where we have to do a lot to make the iceberg work...

Q: Is it both lack of staff and excessive cases from both ends?

PETERSON: Yes. But you do need depth in therapy, but you see while. You are still able to focus a lot more on therapy; we have to go for group and macro, so our strategies and interventions have to be on a larger scale. Because we were dealing with basic needs not being met. Peoples' own perception of what the change is and the pace of the change, and as well as where we were coming from. Trying to take professionals who were trained in a particular way would be well-suited, which a lot of them since have gone to the UK in particular, - because they are suited.

Q: Yes, trained in that tradition?

PETERSON: Yes, but they were not suited for the development needs of this new democracy.

Q: So you stuck it out? It sounded like you always intended to and that was...

PETERSON: Yep. From the beginning, when I got that job, I said that this job cannot be dealt with; you can't even start to break this if you're not going to be here for two terms, minimum. I can set short-term goals for myself, and I can set long-term goals for myself in this job. I can start integration, but there is also a process of education that has to go with it. I can change the founding formula, but how long will it take to change people's hearts and minds? If the workers don't respect the people they deal with. They haven't heard the consultation. It's a part of the strategy to not talk down and make people feel that they are now victims more than they should be, instead of survivors. The social welfare challenge will not be won.

Q: So, in fact in your capacities in the provincial government, you actually shifted a mentality or started to, in the professional corps that you were working on?

PETERSON: First, I had to set the example and work the hardest, and I understood that in order to get things right. I found myself in the first year re-writing everything that I got, but then starting to build trust. I call myself a social capitalist at times, although capital has always been a terrible world for a socialist, and I grappled with it. But in the theory which I also borrowed from Canada and the State social capital, understanding the concept of peoples sweat equity as they contribute to change is absolutely important. Not always governments ran.

Q: So capital in the sense of human resources?

PETERSON: Exactly, the human capital – the human contribution to make the change.

Q: In the 70s and the 80s when you were becoming ready to do this, I think no one predicted that a time would come when you would be able to do so.

PETERSON: I was teasing the class today, and I said “I wrote about the revolution since the 70s.” and we did not determine this, because it was a negotiated settlement, a lot of us felt as a revolution would come.

Q: In a way this was very felicitous, you were trained... looking backwards, it is almost a coincidence isn't it - that you chose a field which later became a field of enormous significance. No one could have foreseen it.

PETERSON: The field itself lost its credibility because of the work force. You know, we had CODESA, which is the convention. In 1992-1993 the talks for the negotiated settlement. During those talks we had what is called a “sunset clause” where government workers at the time so they could keep their jobs. Now, we weren't able to, even in the States you have it when the President goes in the top end goes? If it's a new party, it's some horse trading and whatever it takes to either sustain certain programs or shift down programs. But here we had people that when I put my foot through the door on the first of July, from the minister's office into the department to take over the leadership. He had to go with me because the workers thought, “The communist are coming” I have never been a communist, I am proud of my socialist leanings, but I'm a religious person.

Q: Sorry, so the sunset clause?

PETERSON: Said we had to keep those workers. Even if they all came from different departments, because you know we had a colored department to deal with colored people, and the African department, and the Bantustan for the Bantustans, and then we had the white department, and the Indian department. So now we had to bring all these groups together, so on top of a difficult change you had the different leadership styles and the different leaders in position. And then I replaced their leader, their work leader, so I was the top end official between them and the politicians. They didn't obviously trust me.

Q: Obviously? I would obviously trust you myself. But why didn't they, because you were new?

PETERSON: Because they had to work, they also knew about me, and they knew that the way they did business would not be acceptable. Change was going to come. They could try to slow it down every day.

Q: Why would they want to?

PETERSON: Because they looked for ways. I have to tell you, the western cape with all its difficulties. They have always had a challenge, because of the colored grouping, the biggest in the middle. There had been the challenge of who's using it for what purpose. Because of their own sense of not belonging - which was an issue for a long time with colored people.

Q: Am I naïve to think that social workers would have wanted to be a part of change?

PETERSON: That's what you would think if you read Perlman, but when it's coming to you as part of a political, because you see social workers were a part of the vanguard, in keeping people sacred first of all, in dishing out different resources.

Q: I see, I see. So very much keeping the old system, I see, I see, okay.

PETERSON: As they said "no, they want it all, you competent black person, with a white person. "You know, they are just so different, the experience of life, no, it will not work" and I said, " no it will work, because we are all going to make that a targeted goal.

Q: So I would say you are not a risk averse person? And you do not flee from conflict?

PETERSON: Ooh, I am risky, and conflict is a very key element in the change process.

Q: Very tough job. Now, just because of the parochial interest I have here, I now have to ask you how the American experience fits into all of this?

PETERSON: As I said it wasn't I felt it wasn't timely because of my health status but I was on the mend. But when I got there, first of all I met a wonderful person, Joyce Meadows, and I have been, or she was my companion throughout the whole trip. She was assigned to me. She is an African-American. Wonderful woman, and we just bonded, we just clicked so. And then I explained to her, she could be facilitator if people were giving me something she could facilitate, make a couple of calls. You get a program that more or less met my needs. You might say what is your... and she would listen carefully, and I would say to her 'this is my challenge'. You see, we have these young people, these children, and we have people looking after them who are not trained. So we have a problem with the level of education because they will not be able to grasp, because I had my father who was a teacher to help teach me beyond school. And I understood the value of that.

Q: Did you find that this was not the case in...

PETERSON: Our moms are working until nine and they leave home at four or five, they come home. Then their children are sleeping. “Did you read today my child?”

Q: So would you feel that your own personal background was exceptional both here and in the US?

PETERSON: Yes, and also I am very specific. If I think you are veering with the point, I will ‘bring you to hear’, because I can see how this could work for me. So obviously, when we went to the Head Start programs, I saw African-Americans moms, I saw Hispanics – I looked at diversity. I looked at the challenges, and felt that in some tracks we were very equal.

Q: For example?

PETERSON: On the diversity issues. There were issues that I could relate to what they were saying. But the resource level was entirely different. Obviously I enjoyed the Head Start. It took me seven years to get near to Head Start here.

Q: Meaning you took the concept and you applied it here?

PETERSON: I took everything I could get. I mean my luggage was overweight. I was posting thing back, because I wasn’t prepared to leave without it. And I wanted to understand what the key elements were in getting a bright child. You get a child who is well rounded, receptive. So when they get to grade one, that’s an investment for life. I came back here and said ‘no, early childhood is educate, it is something we will not give to education we will fight hard to keep it, we must change it.’ we need to make sure that the child doesn’t just go there to eat and sleep and play ‘ring around the rosie’. There must be intellectual stimulation. And it took me seven years, because I never had that resource base.

Q: Did you have a new name for it?

PETERSON: Well, we just called it ECD, Early Childhood Development. It took more years to get education, health and social development, to sit around the table and agree on things.

Q: Do I understand, that Head Start from the US, you know more about this than I do, has been diminished greatly?

PETERSON: Well, at that time it was still sparkling, that was during the Clinton years. It was sparkling; it was doing its thing. And I hosted a young person who would come through Head Start, and have change. So I think it was, and I think as things change – like any economy and there was a scaling down, I’ll say by 2000. In 2000 – there were other priorities as it is with every government. But I worked in the public service formally for 14 and a half, 15 and a half. The one year as the Strategic Management

Team person. And I understood that you have to make choices, policy option, not everything you want is going to happen, I found myself to be very influential on the national level, because they chose people who were not qualified in the field. So because I had the qualifications as well the manager I could push harder.

Q: Well, you are very charitable to forgive any government for diminishing programs as fine as Head Start.

PETERSON: That's something they have to sort up themselves. You vote people out, you know. They got voted out.

Q: I didn't, but. Interestingly you found a model in the US that was robust at the time that you visited. Has since then diminished, and yet you have imported this to South Africa?

PETERSON: I tailored it, and retailored it, by using key concepts, put in with local conditions.

Q: So you have been the vector of Head Start, and if we were a dying planet, and a spaceship took us to Mars – that would be you?

PETERSON: Yes, It was really, if you go to some of our sights, you will find a computer in the site. Because I have said that all computers are not going to be used, send them down to the first base. Early childhood care is my first base.

Q: Are you familiar with the program “One Laptop per Child”? \

PETERSON: Noo,

Q: What is the meaning of Head Start, ECD to you? I believe again as an untrained generalist, that the point was to give children of different social backgrounds an equal opportunity to start on the same level? Is that somewhat your vision of it?

PETERSON: Yes, it is. Because a child who lives in an informal with parents who are working doesn't have a chance to impart the intellectual stimulation that a child requires. That meal that we give is food support; protection of problems in the home can stop there already. The abuse gets picked up. So I used to type broad drafts – to give every child an equal opportunity and the outcome, the goal – the outcome for the country is supposed to be kids who are ready to take on the challenge of education, and add to our human capital – because we don't have sufficiently skilled people. And my point in this was no in middle school or high school. You have to start, if you are going to have a child who comes out in the informal sector doing science and match where exactly? Unless you start to educate them by counting stones.

Q: In fact this type of program assists to a greater degree, children with greater social challenges than others who have this given to them. And again we come back...

PETERSON: The others could afford it you see, my point is, if you look at it the white children were getting 12 rand, and then having to bring them all down to 4 rand. I said you coming down from 12 to 4 because your parents can afford that, because you see it only cost 4 rand because I worked out the Unit Cost, and said what we could offer.

Q: Cost for what?

PETERSON: For a child per day to be in an early childhood care setting.

Because I worked out – if the child is going to be there for the aid, because there will be a support person plus a person who is trained – “that will go to salaries, that will go to, you know, I just worked out the grid of cost.” To bring the one rand to the four rand and to bring the eight rand to the four rand and to bring the twelve rand to the four rand, this is what’s going to take place.

Q: Are you familiar with the work of school chancellor Michelle Rhee in District of Colombia?

PETERSON: No! And I said that we would get companies involved, and that we would do other things to help. How much money is health going to give to the nutrition program? So I started pulling...

Q: So, you made a remarkable model and it took seven years doing it for the Cape, to what extent did these programs, or do you find these in any other provinces? Were you a pilot in any sense?

PETERSON: We were pilots, it took us ten years to infiltrate, because you see the other provinces, and I always say you must understand the challenges. In the rural provinces – the mummies stayed with their children, they did not take them anywhere. So we had to modify this where a group of mothers could come together with one informant, one skilled person. Three times a week to give stimulation. So I kept on adapting to local circumstances.

Q: In the Cape right?

PETERSON: Yes, but that was at the national level.

Q: But other provinces noticed what you were doing?

PETERSON: Oh yes, lots of the work we did!

Q: So in fact, in a sense you led the model for the country?

PETERSON: Yes, fortunately, because I had come with an ANC background in welfare, that gave me the head start into the sector. So I could get the minister’s ear a bit more. And he would come, the national minister would come and say to me, “I am sending you

to the Eastern Cape” and I said “No, you can’t just send me from here, these people pay me in the Western Cape, you can’t just send me. But send a couple of people and let’s see if we can work together, so that they can go back empowered. “

Q: This was the mid- 90s, and I was here at that time, and I remembered it as a time of euphoria, am I exaggerating?

PETERSON: No, we were! I still am today.

Q: It seems as if a minister is noticing the work of a professional such as yourself, and feeling the urgency of spreading this model, the Eastern Cape being a great port area. This is an inspiration. Nobody was sitting on their hands.

PETERSON: No, because you see I didn’t, I made my team work long and hard. The first three months, I was the only one who stayed after four. And I felt we had so much work to do. Within a year, it was at least ten lights on, by the time I left there; you could call anytime, there are people in those buildings. It’s not about working late, it’s about working smarter, but because I was so driven at that time was too little to achieve.

Q: So others followed your model...

PETERSON: But you see, others also said to me “Why do you stay so long in the same job?” and I said “Hmm, do you not get it?” because I said at the day when I had my interview that it would take a minimum of ten years. Now this is my 11th, and in my 12th year, and the guy I started out with, Ebrahim Rasool, became the premier. And he said “I am seconding you from Head of Social Development to be the Director General in the province.

Q: When was this?

PETERSON: Well, in 2007 I became the acting.

Q: Explain to the Americans the function of a Director General.

PETERSON: The Director General’s principal is the Premier of the province, so the Premier has to provide the province with a vision; he then has twelve departments to feed into the vision. His vision comes from the president and the ruling party. But he has to give effect to it through the budget and the programs and his Department of Education, his Department of Health, Department of Social Development, Department of Housing, and Department of the Environment – these are the departments in the local government.

Q: So the Premier is the Head of State so to speak?

PETERSON: Yes, he is like the governor. Premier is a governor.

Q: And the Director General would be the CEO?

PETERSON: I report and I have all my colleagues who are heads they meet with me. My job is to make sure we head it in the right direction.

Q: The Director General does the work? The Premier appears in public?

PETERSON: Yes. And he said “I want you to come and help me take this document and make it look, it’s the vision! To grow the Cape, and to give it hope, and design programs -- which I did very quickly. But then we have had political change, before Thabo Mbeki got said good bye to, he got said goodbye to.

Q: The Premier?

PETERSON: Yes, they were part of the Mbeki thing that...

Q: Right, lots of ferment during those years.

PETERSON: Yes, yes. And although he worked hard and smart, that thing happened. My appointment was formalized on the 17th of January 2008, after being acting Director General for six months; I became the Director General on a five year contract – which I did not see through to term, because we had an election last year, and the DA came in. So I became collateral damage.

Q: The Democratic Alliance. The Cape I think is the only province that does not have the ANC...

PETERSON: The only province, yes yes yes.

Q: Oh dear, so this cut you short?

PETERSON: So I am unemployed.

Q: I am speechless.

PETERSON: Oh, but it’s not going to be for long. I am enjoying this. Last year was a difficult personal year for me, my husband died from cancer, my mother-in-law died, and my father has cancer – so this gave me the right amount of time to breathe. So I thank Helen Zille for giving me six months off, because that’s how long it took to negotiate settlement.

Q: Well, this is amazing. Again the mundane. You formed some relationships, and what other cities and programs, you saw Head Start and you saw...

PETERSON: Well, I went to Chicago, Washington DC. I should send you the itinerary. There were lots of little places, Texas.

Q: But in general you would find that the models were familiar to you from your readings, but the massive resources took you by surprise? In a field which I have to say in the US is perceived by many people to be grossly under expended

PETERSON: Yes, New York. Well, that's the point. When you go into an agency it sounded like back home. "Oh no, we are under resourced, the government does not give us enough resources to the sector." And I just laughed at them, and said "You have no clue what under resourced looks like."

Q: In that sense you had more to teach than to learn?

PETERSON: Yes, and so we found ourselves sharing. And in that way I built relationships. But I must say that the lasting relationship, well obviously Joyce Meadows, even if we haven't spoken to each other in a year and a half, but we will catch up.

Q: I will find her.

PETERSON: Please do, and say to her, I do not... I moved and changed my telephone number. She lives in Washington, near the station, hehe. Anyway, the Howard relationship, coming out from that visit I came at a time or at the same time we went to did the South African Franklin Sonn was there, the ambassador. And they were doing the Howard and South African Partnership. And because I was chatty, eager to make real meaningful connections, I immediately fell into that group.

Q: So did you work with the ambassador on that relationship or...?

PETERSON: So we had a conference on substance abuse which I continue to be a part of, with Doctor Jean Bailey. Hmm, from the whole social development department, social work department at Howard, but also the substance abuse, which this led me later to connections with the UN. Traveled around in all these circles, and focused quite a bit on substance abuse because this is a big challenge for the Western Cape.

Q: The theme of this study or project is apartheid, legally no more apartheid, but I think...

PETERSON: Ooh, this is now becoming to the challenge and the fact that we didn't quite make it.

Q: How did it not work and what do you feel is being done to bring practice up to theory?

PETERSON: I think in the euphoria we assume that people are going to open up their hearts, and you know my thing is, that if everybody employs two people at their home, just those who can – that will help with the unemployment issues. If you have a gardener and someone at least inside; you could have a childcarer, so I believe that people should open up their hearts those who have.

There are lots of haves, and if we took on the education responsibility of one child and if we volunteered, then every citizen would be contributing to the change.

Q: But it did not happen?

PETERSON: No, we assumed too much.

Q: What about the stigma of being a domestic worker?

PETERSON: Yes, but you must make sure that the work condition match the dignity of the person doing the work. A home exec in my home will be treated as a home exec in my home. I will first make sure that they can still go to school, and then I make sure they learn there. Or can they be taught to drive, but they must learn a couple of things.

Q: Did you feel that you were able to use your expertise and professional position to advance this; well this was a disappointment because it did not happen.

PETERSON: I asked people to go out and volunteer, go paint a school. I tried to inculcate and that's where I used social capital as a driver. For people who work in government to go in and give their assistance to different places. I would see it personally; I don't want to talk about myself or what I give because that is not how this is supposed to be.

Q: Hmm, yes it is! If you are an example than yes!

PETERSON: I saw this young person at work and said "she's got potential", and they said no, but the person you appoint as your secretary must have... and I said "that one! I am going to help teach her," so I said, "Have you finished matric? Which is the end of our school and she said "No"! And I said, "That's fine, now you are going to work, and find a way for you to do matric. It is going to take two years." And at times I was answering the phone because I wanted her to go to the classes. That was okay.

Q: This was at the office?

PETERSON: At my office. But then I started to say to other senior managers: "Help! If you help one person, five people will be helped in that family." And she never had a child to go to university, and we grew them so that she could have a first graduate.

Q: Wonderful.

PETERSON: A person making tea in our building, first we had people who were making tea, but they belonged to the government, and then they outsourced. Did you know that they became the model? Cutbacks, unpaid pension etc. So again I saw a group of people who are going to... and I said to them "How can we help them, from the education department." You can't just help adults outside the ... you can help adults in the government. We started albeit in the government, for people who were working in the

government, then this company came in, and I always chat with people, couple of people in the lift, and said “ooh, I would love to work with little children, but I didn’t go to school miss.” So I said: okay. But I made my senior managers wanting to take on a person to pay the fees. And she’s finishing her matric now.

Q: Now, that’s an example of advancing society on a micro level.

PETERSON: Yes, but if you start to reach... now you see the failure is for me that we did not have people who opened themselves up to embrace the change, because you see they stole my mother. She is 82 and she will comment that there is still apartheid in this country. She’ll tell me straight.

Q: The ability to open up in all strata of society?

PETERSON: Mhm, we still have a lot of glass ceilings, and for a long time I was the only women head of department in this province after beating down the guys who thought I was easy.

Q: Clearly not!

PETERSON: For a long time, so we haven’t achieved those things.

Q: Well maybe that’s something else.

PETERSON: We also focused on women to the detriment of men. Men were losing, you know when we came here, and we created a lot of programs which is great! Not in that way, I am not sure how you are taking that.

Q: When you say detriment?

PETERSON: Yes, now I am going to explain. We have men who physically abuse women by hundreds and thousands. We don’t design programs for them because we were designing the uplifting programs for women. They were the ones who were also losing their jobs – those who were colored were losing their jobs, because the skills need changes. As we moved on, people were becoming unemployed and unemployable. So we didn’t put enough stop gaps in there to retrain. We were mechanizing, but not...

Q: So you mentioned program for women more than for men?

PETERSON: Yes, we were saying women because there was a glass ceiling for us, we were oppressed, we had all the things needed for designing programs for women at great speed. We were implementing it, but they had to go home to the men who weren’t educated. So the one was fast tracked and the other was left behind.

Q: In retrospect was that a mistake?

PETERSON: The fast track is not a mistake, but you have to do to bring the others, and where you have to put something in; we didn't.

Q: Can't do everything.

PETERSON: It comes to the choices, the policy choices. As long as it is the right choice made. Promoting genders, and particularly women, marginalized women, African women, women with disabilities – I still support that 150 percent.

Q: You have a ton of challenges here, you have racial disparities, and resources accordingly. You have gender differences; you have the urgency of getting children properly on their way, and you just mentioned disabilities. How can you deal with all of this?

PETERSON: This is what I am passionate about. I mean the policy options that you make every year. I mean, I used to work very closely with the Health Department, and as Director General, I would sit there with Professor Househam, Craig, and like, how many operations does that buy us in state hospitals?

Q: We are talking about a finite pie being re-divided.

PETERSON: And listening to 12 heads of departments. And then being able to cut through that and say "What is in our best interest?"

Q: It's not a way to gain popularity.

PETERSON: No! But somehow I still had friends. And also I started programs, community based programs which I knew that would stop when the change came which they now are. People would be put out of work by the end of March, so I would not be the only one. We have already lost three years of departments, because they had been bought out some of them, others tried to be fired. I was tried to be fired, it was so much easier that paying it out.

Q: Being fired means you get severance pay or something, I mean is that the point?

PETERSON: No, you just get fired!

Q: What do you mean: trying to be fired?

PETERSON: I mean, I think when the new administration came in, it would have been better for them to fire...locking of horns yes, different! Entirely different!

Q: Social change is very closely related to political...

PETERSON: That's why I just came from giving a lecture tracking the political change and the social development along that.

Q: I will not ask you to re-give the lecture, but can you highlight some of the points that you made?

PETERSON: I'll just give you the slides, that's easier. No, it was about, you know you see people who work for social development as a sweetheart, traditional people, just patronizing doing good, and not understanding the political dimensions. And because it was state funded a lot of the organizations they didn't understand the timeline of when social workers became involved in the struggle. Beyond an individual basis as a mobilized group – and because I was a part of that grouping I could speak to that history. And say why that was important to acknowledge.

Q: Was this a homogeneous group partly because it was the only option that some groups had in the 70s?

PETERSON: No, it wasn't actually. To break that, you see before we had the black social workers forum, and the white social workers forum and the product that we started of which I was a part of was across -- non sexist, non racist -- looking for a uniform welfare system. And recognizing that as a part of what should be part of the history of this profession in the country.

Q: Now, when you took a position when you said it would take 10 years to make these changes how far did you get?

PETERSON: I would say that the things that I set as a target. I have achieved those outcomes. What did not help my work were the macro elements of unemployment, housing, and the development issues. And what would still have to be done, is what I call post-traumatic stress disorder by community, not by individual. And that healing would contribute to people being more giving, receiving and opening, because it would heal the wounds.

Q: I guess this is not quantifiable, but where the society stands with post-traumatic stress. You're a scientist a pragmatist, what do you say, are we halfway there, are we one quarter of the way there, to healing?

PETERSON: A lot of work to be done, because you see, more burdens have come upon us since 1994. HIV and AIDS, a recession, internal fighting in the ANC. You see we were hoping to pull through, we were. It is when you move from being a social movement, to a political organization and power starts to get out. I must be honest, I am always being honest. Because then you start losing what Madiba put there, investment. You lose a little of what Thabo put down.... and each one of them have put down. Jacob Zuma will often use what he has put down. If he is not careful, because of the broader elements that's corroding.

Q: The variables that overwhelm us all, disease, economic recession...

PETERSON: Yes, and you have to make choices now! That's the legacy. I mean I want to be as happy in 20 years and another 20 years. I still want to be as happy as I am now for the reasons that I am happy. And the sadness that I feel I would like that to be dealt with a little more. I am also a pragmatist; you can't do everything and spread the butter thin.

Q: I could guess at the answer, but what is the source of the sadness?

PETERSON: Young people, I am just trying to complete a PhD on looking at how young people acts on opportunities. Who's the person who opens the door? Who is the person who kicks it shut? What is it that we must do? They are the future!

Q: Do you feel that young people have a, compared to yourself in the 70s – let's say legislation, apartheid aside if that's possible. Do you feel that they are inclined, this particular generation, inclined to avail themselves to opportunities that they have?

PETERSON: I don't think there are enough opportunities.

Q: So you feel that the motivation is there but the opportunities are not?

PETERSON: I think the President was trying to go there last night in the call to action. I think he was putting his foot down. But if you look at it by number, children parenting, not skilled sufficiently. So education. Opportunities to identify the children with the potential. To help steer them into the right, off to school to make decision that will not only help our country, but that will help them too.

Q: We keep coming back... I think that your belief in early childhood development is the basis of your...

PETERSON: I have put my egg in that basket, but now the country must do the same.

Q: Now, just to set a context for the reader this is February 12th and yesterday was the 20th anniversary of the release of Nelson Mandela. It was also the State of the Union address of Jacob Zuma. How did he do? What's your rating of... this is not journalism but I can't resist asking.

PETERSON: Hmm, I wasn't blown away, I wasn't euphoric, I was euphoric because I saw my Madiba. I was euphoric because we celebrated.

Q: What was he doing by the way, was he reading the speech? He was steadfast avoiding the camera?

PETERSON: Yes, he was reading the speech. No because he has a hearing aid, so the distance between that and, you know, that's why you always get him to read. He will smile at the camera; he's alright with that.

I was happy, that he recognized the youth of difficulties, and we got to do a lot more work to organize that. I was happy that he was prepared to say to businesses that 'We will give you a small rebate.' They should have given that anyway. So that youth could be rebated and skills could be trained.

Q: Rebate for taking youth as ...?

PETERSON: Yes, unskilled youth. I was happy about that. I was happy about the child support grant going up to 18, but would have been happier if we had put something in place for the mothers who were having them. So that's the gap. I was happy about education tracking, monitoring and evaluation. So you see, these are really six things out of an hour and 15 minutes. And the last thing I was happy about was the performance agreements for ministers.

Education tracking for math and science, particularly at level grades 3, 6 and 9. Because I have always said that 12th grade is the end of school and what did we do?

Because you see I believe in early childhood, picking up the problem early. So there were a couple of things that got me as happy as I am today. I could have been happier, but then strategic choices will always be made in a government. And the fact that it's not going to happen tomorrow you see, that is also going to drive me insane because in established third world countries it takes about 3 years to design the policy and the programs. We are trying to do everything in a year and 6 months. And then we don't go back to evaluate and monitor and kick it out when it doesn't work. We let it die a sloooooow and paaaainful death. Now that is starting to be corrected as well. So there are a lot of wonderful, positive, things still going to happen, but not as quickly as I want them to be done. But that's me; I am impatient for the people who need it.

Q: So it's an impatient country, because so much change has happened so quickly?

PETERSON: Yes, and sometimes when things change so fast without the commensurate education – you know finding the groups where people can sit and discuss government. I feel that people are still toddlers in understanding what the government must do for them. And I was just working on a program before I unceremoniously left there on educating 15 communities to understand poor people, and to understand how government works. Understanding what does your community need, what's the biggest three things? How can we get attention? And I can tell you, not in 15 years, but the three things that will make it better for you. And you got to look at it in a two to three year cycle because that is the medium arrangement for money – a government gets money. And if you are consistent with your message then you can prove with stats why you need it and you will get it. But the program has been thrown out now.

Q: In the president address last night – some of the examples you just used require resources. Does the country have the resources to back up his promises?

PETERSON: I am hoping that now he has the monitoring and evaluation ministry – that they will actually monitor and evaluate and you that things have not happened correct or kill – throw it out. Because you need to take, there is money! I have worked in government – of course we will never have enough, show me the country who says they have enough. That's not the point. But there is money; it is the utilization -- you got to live within your means. As a country, we do not need to own the whole world. We must be proud of South Africa.

Q: So, you think some of the objectives, targets expressed yesterday are realistic?

PETERSON: Yeah, but they will have to be worked on, and people who know what they are doing will have to write them. Politicians say you need a work force to produce.

Q: Well, I think we need you back!

PETERSON: Weeeell, we'll see, maybe in another month and then I have to go work somewhere, but at this time I think I am going to Pretoria. I can't stay in Cape Town, because the DA and I won't get along. It's a fact.

Q: It's only Cape Town right? It's the only place where the DA is?

PETERSON: Yes, but this is my home.

Q: How dare they?

PETERSON: I feel invaded.

Q: Many people from Cape Town would rather die than go to Pretoria, but you would consider it?

PETERSON: Yes I would.

Q: It used to be described as a cemetery with traffic lights, but it changes...

PETERSON: No, no it's not like that. No its got buzz. You see, a lot of the colleagues I have worked with over the past couple of years, as I moved up and as a Director General of a province – I made a weekly trip to speak to the right Reverend Frank Chikane, and others, because you then engage with the presidency and other Director Generals all the time.

Q: So if I go to Pretoria next week- might I find you there, employed?

PETERSON: No, not next week because governments will slowly win the prequel. I think, latest April 1.

Q: Really? There's something...

PETERSON: I have decided that I don't want to be a DG this minute after this experience year. I want to break into Pretoria because it is a new place. I do want to break into Pretoria just one level below for a year. I planned it like that. I plan my career, I always have. And then once people have seen who I am in the work place right there – my reputation will take care of the rest.

Q: I ardently wish that.

PETERSON: God will, because I believe you see, I really do believe.

Q: I can't judge about belief, I can see very obviously that the energy motivation and determination...

PETERSON: and positive thought!

Q: Have taken you very far, and will in the future. Well this has been an exhilarating session, anything to add. What's coming in South Africa and I mean everybody has had a comment about the 20th anniversary. If you have one, you are welcome to say it.

PETERSON: Well as I said to you before, 20 years on I still feel the euphoria. Little bit jaded on some of the aspects I have explained. Madiba '91! we didn't think we would see it, wonderful. God gave him more years; we need that hand at the tiller. Although he keeps on saying he's a pensioner and retired. We still need that, the very image of him. 2010 for our country, World Cup 2010. One month, we will see what that does, I am hoping it will grow people closer to each other. Economically -- not that great, because it's only a month. Let's hope it does. There are some small school entrepreneurs. They will let them stand at the station and the stadium there, that will make something that can be sold – they will sell something for the small craft people. That will be good. They will reduce their prices and people will actually sell. I think it will be a good year. I think politically, the ANC must consolidate its base, with it's base which is branches, educate politically so that the kind of impatience which people should have, but it should come with “this is how it works”. So that we don't lose our own people, and that issues of HIV and AIDS continue to have hard work.

Q: 10 percent? What do you believe about the percentages, nobody really knows do they?

PETERSON: It's less than 10.

Q: Perhaps President...

PETERSON: You see, if you balance it out, and have enough experience working in health the mother-to-child program, the stepping up the additional drug, all those things that were introduced last year will start bearing fruit. Certain areas, the rural areas, ...please flood that place with more people. You've got to look at the work force there and we got to bring more people, like I said to these social workers, "you're about 80 MP. You see, we have 11,000 social workers in the country, we should have 20,000 as a minimum, so get on, finish the course, graduate and come and work.

Q: Was this a part of your message today?

PETERSON: Yes, we need everyone out there doing it. And we need very definitely to create opportunities for the youth.

Q: Well, these are very difficult mountains to climb

PETERSON: Who says the challenge must be small?

Q: I have no doubt that you will.

PETERSON: I am a person, but I still believe firmly that I am a part of the collective who want change in this country. And yes, some people who come to the ANC trying to enrich themselves; we have to weed that out. And ... to the growth of this country. And I pay my taxes. I don't try to find a loophole; I believe that it is part of the base. You feel more passionately if you are confronted with choices. Hard choices about how many operations, how many children will have ECD, how many children will really benefit from after school programs? Another thing I saw in the states.

Q: Aah, after school. Some of the community or organizations have developed to some extent? I have seen them. It's quite remarkable.

PETERSON: Yes, it is really exciting; it took us three years, before we got that going.

Q: In other countries it would take 30 years, but in your case three. Wow.

PETERSON: That's already too late and too long by our standards. This is sometimes the undoing of some of the programs, good visions from the bosses, but the technicians, and some technicians are scared to tell their bosses it they think it won't work.

Q: It could be human nature? Or the nature of organized...

PETERSON: Yes, the nature of the business we find ourselves in, it's the place...

Q: Former and future Madame Director General, thank you for this conversation.

PETERSON: Dan, glad I could help, Frank asked really nicely.

Q: Well, if it took Frank to do it, well then I thank Frank also.

End of interview