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A Brief History of the South African Anti-Apartheid Work at Delaware Pacem in Terris in Wilmington, DE

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South Africa Project

The origins of the Delaware Pacem in Terris Anti-Apartheid work lie in an act of Apartheid itself. When the South African government denied Mrs. Sally Motlana an exit visa to speak in the United States, they didn’t count on Father Sipo Mzimela who was already in the U.S. being able to fill in for her. He spoke at the Pacem in Terris annual dinner on May 6, 1984 and at the Third Annual Wilmington Interfaith Peace with Justice Vigil that followed the dinner. He explained the workings of Apartheid and exhorted those who heard him to challenge the role that the U.S. government and corporations were playing in supporting the Apartheid regime. A group of people who attended decided to begin a research and action project on corporations and banks based in Delaware that were doing business with South Africa. They held their first meeting on June 6, 1984 in Wilmington, DE under the leadership of Craig Stevens, Program Associate at Delaware Pacem in Terris, and called themselves the “South Africa Project.”

Besides educating themselves and the public about Apartheid, the members also asked Delaware political candidates what they were willing to do to end Apartheid and started working on a Delaware Anti-Apartheid Conference to be held on March 30, 1985 from 8:30 a.m. - 2 p.m. at Ezion Mt. Carmel United Methodist Church, 800 N. Walnut St., Wilmington, DE. On February 13, 1985 Daki Napata spoke in Wilmington on, “What We Can Do to End Apartheid in South Africa.” He was a community organizer and activist who served as the Southern Africa Program staff for the American Friends Service Committee in Baltimore. He was the Co-Chair of the Maryland Anti-Apartheid Coalition and co-founder of the Baltimore Divestment Coalition.

The overall goal of the Conference on March 30, 1985 was education and the formation of a coalition to bring about the divestiture of state public funds held by institutions that invested in South Africa. Planners of the Conference were well aware that successful divestment would require a great deal of education, public action, and political organization. The official name of the conference was “A Conference on South Africa:
Building Common Ground for Education and Action to End Apartheid.” The keynote speaker was Victor Mashabela from the African National Congress.

As a follow-up to the conference, the group which continued to be a project of Pacem in Terris took on the name of the Delaware Committee on South Africa and was co-led by Rev. Don Hamilton, pastor of Mt. Joy United Methodist Church, and Craig Stevens from Pacem in Terris. They held a public showing of the film, “South Africa Belongs to Us” on May 19, 1985.

**Delaware Committee for a Free South Africa**

By July of 1985 the group had changed its name to **“The Delaware Committee for a Free South Africa”** and it remained under the leadership of Craig Stevens and Rev. Hamilton. On September 18, 1985 The Delaware Committee for a Free South Africa sponsored a successful Witness and Rally for a Free South Africa at Rodney Square, a small park and major landmark in downtown Wilmington. Over 150 people attended and the main speaker was Jerry Herman, the national American Friends Service Committee Southern Africa Program Director. An article about the rally appeared the next day in the *Wilmington News Journal* with a photograph of Jerry Herman.

Divestment work gained strength and on December 17, 1985 the New Castle County voted 4 -3 in favor of a divestment ordinance introduced by Karen Peterson, President of the County Council. County Executive Rita Justice vetoed the divestment ordinance. On January 14, 1986, the Coalition for Divestment from South Africa, a diverse group of citizens, which enjoyed support, leadership, and resources from The Delaware Committee for a Free South Africa, held a candlelight vigil that over 100 citizens attended outside of the City-County building in Wilmington, encouraging County Council members to override the veto. However, the override effort failed. The Coalition for Divestment from South Africa came back to the New Castle County Council on January 28, 1986 to support strengthening amendments to a bill introduced by Karen Peterson. Their goal was to enact a law that mandated full divestment of the County’s pension funds by 1988. This final Divestment Ordinance was passed by the New Castle County Council on January 28, 1986 by a unanimous vote and County Executive Rita Justice approved it on January 31, 1986. The group decided that the next divestment challenge would be a state divestment bill which Rep. Al Plant agreed to introduce to remove any South African investments from the Delaware pension fund for state employees. Although this effort continued for several years, it was never successful.

By June 1986 Ethelwyn Lang had become the Co-Chair of the Delaware Committee for a Free South Africa and Craig Stevens was the Committee’s program organizer. The group held a March and Vigil on June 16, 1986 to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Soweto Massacre which received good press coverage in the *Wilmington News Journal*. The group held two showings of the film, “Six Days in Soweto,” in conjunction with the March and Vigil.
Craig Stevens resigned from Pacem in Terris to take a full-time position with Delaware Volunteer Legal Services in May 1986, so Ethelwyn (“Wyn”) Lang became the volunteer staff person and Chair of the Committee. On November 12, 1986 the Committee sponsored a showing of the film, “Witness to Apartheid” with a discussion afterwards led by Daki Napata of the American Friends Service Committee. The Committee sponsored a talk by Dr. Alfred T. Moleah, an exiled South African activist, on March 25, 1987 in Wilmington at the Delaware Technical and Community College and a talk by a South African student who was an ANC representative on April 6, 1987 at the University of Delaware. On June 1, 1987 two exiled South African women who were touring the United States to raise awareness and create support for the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa and repression in Namibia spoke in Wilmington and launched the “Campaign to Free the Children of Apartheid” in Delaware. On September 9, 1987 the Committee organized tabling at 9th and Market Streets in Wilmington from 12 noon to 1 pm for citizens to sign protest postcards to be sent to the South African Embassy in Washington as part of the Free the Children of Apartheid Campaign. On December 15, 1987 four Delawareans: Ethelwyn Lang, Donna Irwin, Heidi Marohn, and Sally Milbury-Steen from the Committee were arrested outside of the South African Embassy in Washington.

In May 1988 the Committee sponsored a series of Sunday afternoon workshops at the Christina Cultural Arts Center in Wilmington. The first one on May 1 featured Tony Montero who spoke about COSATU (Coalition of South African Trade Unions) and how recent banning orders had affected them. On May 22 a representative of the African National Congress spoke about the ANC and what was going on in South Africa. The final workshop on May 25 was one for children led by SOWETO native Renosi Mokati. It also included a showing of the film strip for young people, “Apartheid is Wrong.” The Committee became part of the national Coke Boycott campaign to make the company sever its economic links to South Africa. The Committee fully embraced economic sanctions against South Africa and supported Rep. Dellum’s bill HB1580 and Sen. Kennedy’s bill S2378 for comprehensive sanctions. The Committee also supported bills (HB133 and HB135) in the Delaware General Assembly introduced by Rep. Al Plant that called for divestment of state pension funds. Neither bill ever passed. In 1988 Committee Chair Wyn Lang, who was a retired teacher, assembled resources for teachers, including the film strip, “Apartheid is Wrong,” the video “A.F.R.I.C.A.” for intermediate and secondary students which also had a teaching and study guide, and a one to six week curriculum, *Strangers in Their Own Country: A Curriculum Guide on South Africa*. All of these materials were available for free use by educators. In March 15 and 22, 1989 the Committee organized two in-service training programs for high school and elementary school teachers. In her report, Wyn Lang noted, “More teachers are utilizing the resources of the Committee in planning and teaching units on South Africa.” On June 16, 1989 the Committee sponsored a Soweto Day noon-time rally on the Market Street Mall in Wilmington and chartered a bus to go to the March for the Children of South Africa national event in Washington on June 17, 1989. In late 1989 the Committee changed its name to the Delaware Committee Against Racism and Apartheid.
SOWETO Festivals

In 1990 after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, the Delaware Committee Against Racism and Apartheid created the sub-group, Delaware Artists Against Apartheid which planned to a SOWETO Festival to be held in June. The first article soliciting art work for the exhibit that would be part of the Festival appeared in the April-May 1990 issue of the Pacem in Terris newsletter, Delmarva PEACEWORK. The first Festival began with a public reception on Monday, June 11, for the opening of the SOWETO Festival Exhibit at the Wilmington Public Library which was on display until July 4. The exhibit then moved to the Christina Cultural Arts Center from July 5 – 30. The other Festival events were: Wed. June 13, a noon-time concert in Rodney Square by the Griots wa Umoja, an African-American band; Wed., June 13, at 7 pm at West Presbyterian Church there was a program of the videos, “From Wilmington to Johannesburg” produced by Mafundi and LaDon Williams and Festival greetings from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and music performed by the Harry Spencer Jazz Band and by Sunyata, pianist; Thursday, June 14, from noon – 1 pm there was poetry and music on the Market Street Mall and a performance that evening at 8 pm by Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens at the Grand Opera House in Wilmington; Friday, June 15, there was a Soweto Day Rally from noon – 1 pm at Rodney Square; and Saturday, June 16, there was an 8 pm Concert at the Delaware Theatre Company that featured local musicians. The Festival was quite a success and enjoyed good press coverage in the Wilmington News Journal and in the local African American paper The Gazette. The Pacem in Terris Annual Dinner which was held on October 4, 1990 at Newark United Methodist Church in Newark, DE had a South African theme with a performance before hand by Kamau and his Griots wa Umoja, South African food, and the guest speaker was Godfrey Sithole, a South African in exile since 1962 and the African national Congress Representative in the Philadelphia area.

By 1991 the SOWETO Festival had become an annual event and it continued to follow the week-long format of music, poetry, drama, dance, and art. On June 10 there was a public reception to open the exhibit at the Wilmington Public Library; on June 11 there was a 7 pm performance of “No Struggle, No Progress,” by Mafundi with music by Sunyata at West Presbyterian Church in Wilmington. On June 12 there was a performance by the Griots wa Umoja from 12 noon – 1 pm in Rodney Square, and on June 14 there was a noon time Rally at Rodney Square with speakers, poetry, and music. The grand finale of the Festival was the Soweto Concert on June 29 at 8 pm at the Delaware Theatre Company with local musicians.

The Third Annual SOWETO Festival in 1992 spread the events out more and ran from June 1 – 29 with the Exhibit opening on June 1st at the Wilmington Public Library and running through July 3. The other events were the performances of “And the Children Shall Lead Them” – an original Street Theater play by R. Lawrence McFee II on June 5 from 5 – 6 pm at the Christina Cultural Arts Center Amphitheater in Wilmington. At 7:30 pm on June 9 Dr. Sibusisu Nkomo, who was about to return to South Africa after 16 years in exile, delivered a farewell address at West Presbyterian Church, “The Economics of Racism.” On SOWETO Day, June 16, there was a noon-
time performance of “And the Children Shall Lead Them” at the H.B. DuPont Park, 11th and Washington Streets, Wilmington. That evening at 7:30 pm there was a free showing of the film, “A Dry White Season,” at First & Central Presbyterian Church. The final event, the SOWETO Concert, was held on June 27, at 8 pm at the Delaware Theatre Company and featured performances by local musicians. It was dedicated to the memory of Mr. James White, a staunch supporter of the Festival in the past who had passed in 1992.

The Fourth Annual SOWETO Festival in 1993 followed a new format which continues through today in which the opening reception of the SOWETO Exhibit features not only the artists but also poetry readings and a musical performance. The Exhibit opened on June 7 at the Wilmington Public Library. On June 10 from 12 noon to 1 pm in Rodney Square, there was a SOWETO Children’s Rally with performances by local students from The Creative & Performing Arts Middle School of the Red Clay Consolidated School District. The Festival was dedicated to Ethelwyn Lang, the Chair of the Delaware Committee Against Racism and Apartheid, who was recovering from surgery and unable to attend.

The Fifth Annual SOWETO Festival in 1994 was more ambitious than the previous year’s, so in addition to the opening reception with poetry readings and music on June 6 at the Wilmington Public Library, there was a June 15 video presentation, “One Man’s Journey to Senegal, West Africa,” at 7 pm at the Christina Cultural Arts Center. On June 17 the SOWETO Concert was held at 7 pm at the Christina Cultural Arts Center and the next day, June 18, from 10 am – 1 pm there was a celebration of “The Day of the African Child” at the Christina Cultural Arts Center, jointly sponsored by the DE Committee for UNICEF and the DE Committee Against Racism and Apartheid.

The Sixth Annual SOWETO Festival in 1995 had the art exhibit showing from June 1 – 30 at the Wilmington Public Library and then moving to the Gallery at Grace United Methodist Church in Wilmington for the month of July. The opening reception with artists, poets, and musicians took place on June 5 from 5 – 8 pm. There was Street Theater under the direction of Robert McFee on June 16 at 12 noon outside of the Christina Cultural Arts Center and the SOWETO Concert was held there on Friday, June 30. The Festival was dedicated to the memory of Shirley Blatt, a member of the Committee from its inception and a champion for social and racial justice who had passed away on May 24, 1994.

The Seventh Annual SOWETO Festival in 1996 was scaled down to the art exhibit with the opening reception featuring the artists, poets, and musicians, and it still continues to follow this pattern. It opened on June 7 at the Wilmington Public Library, then moved to the Gallery at Grace United Methodist Church during the month of July.

From 1990 through 1999, the SOWETO Festival Exhibits were held at the Wilmington Public Library. In the year 2000 the exhibit was held at the Gallery at Grace United Methodist Church and in 2001 it was held at the Wilmington North Branch.
Library. From 2002 through the present it has been held at the Gallery at Grace United Methodist Church where it runs each summer from June – August 15.

**Delaware Committee for Racial Justice and Harmony**

In February 1996, the Delaware Committee Against Racism and Apartheid, felt that it needed a new name that better reflected the many changes that had occurred in the new South Africa. It changed its name for a short while to the **Delaware Committee for Racial Harmony**, but by November 1996 it had expanded the name to the **Delaware Committee for Racial Justice and Harmony** which is the name that it still uses. The new name allowed it to take on local issues as well as international ones and in 1996 it became part of an important effort to get the vote restored to Ex-felons in Delaware. Wyn Lang convened a community meeting on September 16, 1996 for the formation of a new coalition on felons’ voting rights. The group that came together that day created became the Alliance for the Restoration of Ex-Offenders Ex-Felon Voting Rights Task-Force and Wyn served as its Co-Chair with Phillip Bannowsky until the end of December 1997. Because restoring the vote to former felons required changing a section of the Delaware Constitution, legislation to modify the Constitution had to be passed by a two-thirds vote by both the Delaware House of Representatives and the Senate in two successive Legislative Sessions. After much hard work, legislation was passed in 2000 which successfully returned the vote to most felons in the State of Delaware.

At the present time, The Delaware Committee for Racial Justice and Harmony’s connection to South Africa remains its annual SOWETO Exhibit which in 2010 took place for the 21st time. Since its inception, it has always donated some of the proceeds from any art sold at the exhibit to South Africa, first through The Africa Fund and now through the Friends of SOMAFCO. The Delaware Committee for Racial Justice and Harmony owes much to the outstanding individuals who have given it leadership and vision over the years. Delaware Pacem in Terris is especially grateful to Craig Stevens, Rev. Don Hamilton, to three Committee champions who are now deceased: Ethelwyn Lang, Shirley Blatt, Ruth Kolber, and to current members Mary Starkweather-White, Earl White, and Sally Milbury-Steen for all of their hard work and dedication. The Committee has always been inspired by the determination of the South African people to end the oppression of the Apartheid regime and will always remain grateful to them for giving us a role in their struggle and helping us experience the truth that the power of each of us individually is intensified when we work collectively to end political and social injustice.

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