

INTERVIEW WITH JANICE BARLING ABOUT APARTHEID

Several members of the Kingston Grandmother Connection lived in South Africa during the time of Apartheid*. Pat Cauldwell spent some time interviewing Janice Barling about her experience. Here are excerpts from that interview.

***Apartheid** is defined as a policy or system of segregation or discrimination on grounds of race. Apartheid was a political and social system in 20th century South Africa while it was under white minority rule from 1948 to the early 1990s. The word apartheid means “apartness” in Afrikaans.

1. What did Apartheid mean to you growing up?

I was born in 1955 so apartheid was well-established for my entire life. Many white people in South Africa were racist to some degree. There was a hierarchy of classes during this time with Whites at the top, followed by Indians, then Coloureds (mixed), and Blacks at the bottom. Japanese and Chinese people were few in number but were considered honorary whites. Each segment lived separately from each other and intermarriage and mingling was illegal. Every Black adult had to carry an ID passbook with them at all times. This determined what area a person was allowed to be in at specified times. There were curfews and if someone was found to be outside their area after curfew, they were arrested.

Traditional black family units were torn apart since the maids worked and stayed on the property of their white employers and husbands and children were not allowed to stay with them; gardeners also lived under these circumstances. Housing for these employees was often just a small room with a toilet outside but no baths. Grandparents in the rural areas took over the role of parents and there was widespread illicit sex. In offices, black women would work as tea ladies or cleaning ladies. Men were errand people, drivers, or cleaners. The black office employees also did not live with their families but rather in small cramped residential settings called townships which were far from the city centres.

Once a week the blacks would have a day off but it was still too far to return to their home communities. They were not allowed to visit places of entertainment or churches in the white sector so they usually just hung around on the streets and visited with each other. Most domestic workers were allowed to visit their families in rural districts once a year for about a three week vacation period.

When I was about 12 years old, I became aware of the difference in how Whites and Blacks were treated. My mother asked me to take some food to a sick employee and I was horrified when I saw up close what her living conditions looked like. The maids sensed my understanding and would talk to me about their situation.

2. When did you first realize change was coming?

I left South Africa in 1984 and apartheid ended in 1991 but unrest was well-established before we left and our intolerance of the conditions and political situation were a big part of why we came to Canada.

The first big protest event took place in Sharpeville in 1960. Seven thousand people of all colours protested against the Passbook laws in front of a police station. The police opened fire and several people were killed. The undercurrent of anger and unrest grew from then.

Black children were educated in the Afrikaans language and they rebelled at this.

Before apartheid many black people were well-educated and many of these people formed the ANC (African National Congress) and organized protests. By 1960 Nelson Mandela had been jailed. All books or pictures of these people were banned but we were aware of their existence through the underground system.

3. Did you have black employees?

Yes. We had two maids. Everyone had maids and gardeners even if you were not wealthy. White people did very little menial labour. And the work was needed by the blacks to support their families even though the pay was poor.

4. Were the employees treated like the slaves of North America?

Yes. They had virtually no rights and always had to be available to serve their white employers.

5. Have you been back since immigrating to Canada?

Yes. I have returned many times because I still have family there. But it is very difficult to go from the safety and security of Canada to the high rates of crime and unrest of South Africa. I still feel guilty when I am visiting because of the abject poverty that still exists. I sometimes feel guilty because I left and admire the White and Black people who were willing to fight for freedom at their own cost.

6. What changes have you seen?

The biggest change is that more children are now in school and that the races can now mix with each other and have relationships.

South Africa is both sophisticated and a 3rd world country in many ways. It was built to accommodate the needs of the White people. So now when Black communities are living in the same areas as Whites, it is more crowded and there is much more traffic.

There is more mixing of the races now and people of colour are moving into the areas that once belonged to Whites. There are some wealthy black people now. And there is a Black middle class which there wasn't before.

7. How are things in South Africa these days?

The government after apartheid was very corrupt so there is still a lot of financial inequality there. There are so many starving people. There is little money, high unemployment, and the public education is still poor in many cases. There are not nearly enough qualified teachers and school supplies. If one can afford to send their children to private schools, then this is the best option.

There are still huge problems in the country because of the corruption, a lost generation of people who were not educated, extreme poverty, and lack of housing. There is currently a lack of water resources in Cape Town which has resulted in there being a real crisis. And there is a definite need for foreign investment but not many countries are willing to do so.

But the government has recently changed and there is a sense of optimism which can hopefully result in positive change.