

Commentary

1+10=50,000 (IN FOUR AND A HALF MONTHS)

By Wynetta Devore

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It is my privilege to comment on the work of Peter Biehl and Rolene Miller. Although I did not have the opportunity to meet Amy Biehl I have been in the townships of Cape Town South African and seen the desolate place where her life was taken. I do have the honor of knowing Rolene Miller having met her on a recent trip to Cape Town. We spoke briefly of her work with the Black women of the townships.

I have had the opportunity to learn more of Rolene's work from Helen Lieberman who is associated with Ikamva Labantu (The Future of Our Nation) the community organization that has given MOSAIC an organizational home. I have read material prepared as proposals for the funding of this important social work training program for Black South African women. I am pleased to add to the knowledge about the work of Rolene Miller and MOSAIC because it needs to be affirmed. But, even more, the work of the Black township women who responded to a radio call to join a training program is to be applauded. Many were apprehensive, unsure of the goals of the program, but joined eager for the opportunity to learn and to find ways to enrich the lives of their families and their community. My new friendships with young Black women and the more mature "mamas" gives me a

greater appreciation for the "10" and "50,000" of the article's title.

"I" is Rolene Miller, a white South African woman, an educator, professional social worker and an activist for the rights of all women. She has been educated under the apartheid system of South Africa. The "10" are Black women of the townships who have had little education under the apartheid system of South Africa. They, their mothers, sisters and women friends have been victims of beatings, rape, and other acts of violence inflicted by family members and police departments. The "50,000" are the number of community members, young and old, male and female, who have had encounters with the ten new women activists, trained to respond to individual and community need.

The MOSAIC "Accumulated Project Work Form" for February 1996 records 9,971 contacts with individuals and groups. Formal presentations were made in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist churches, at police stations, and Langa High School. Workshops were held with sewing groups, women's prayer groups, and clinics at Crossroads and Macassar. Church halls, and the workers own homes were sites for meetings of support groups. Abuse in relationships, rape, loss due to death or divorce were identified

as problems addressed in individual counseling. Informal networking and presentations were made during transport, in the homes of friends, on the street, at creches and in hair salons. The 9,971 included women, men, groups of women and men and youth. Other MOSAIC material comments that this data does not include all contacts, so data collection will become more exacting. More than 10,000 contacts in a short month. A mammoth job!

The Biehl and Miller article presents Miller's perspective related to the need for training responsive to the lives and experiences of the learners and the community. Too often we assume that Western practice methods, particularly those useful in the United States, are universal therefore of value in all human interactions. Too often our social work educators and practitioners pay scant attention to the mounting evidence of our own lack of ethnic and cultural sensitivity. Miller's social work experience led her to understand that methods and curriculum used in Britain, Canada or the United States were not entirely useful in the Black townships created by apartheid. A specially prepared program was essential to maximize the potential for success.

Biehl and Miller list the names of program participants along with their township of residence. I would like to add commentary on the quality of life that may be found in the townships whose names we find so difficult to pronounce. Township homes are, for the most part are poorly constructed, without electricity, running water or toilet facilities.

The latter are shared by the entire community, located at somewhat central points. Nor, is there convenient transportation. Amy Biehl was providing transport for women at the time of her beating and death.

Yet, eager women have completed training, are training other workers, and responding to community needs. The are articulate in relation to their lives and the meaning of the training for them.

Hilda Mtshazi explains "this course is very important in the New South Africa because we women are taken as if our place is in the kitchen only. There is no jobs in S.A. the women are uneducated and have no skills by doing this we can help the abused women in our society who are crying for help."

In her younger years Nthasi Motsapi says "I thought that when I am growing up I will be a social worker. But in vain, I never reach that stage, because I am from a very poor family. My mother never had enough money for me to continue with my studies."

Alice Khochlokala writes, "I wanted to fulfill my wishes as a child of becoming a social worker. But for my parent single not married and a domestic worker with 7 children earning R2.20 those years. I couldn't make it."

These are participant responses to the model that Miller has presented for the design and implementation of a program that responds to the needs of Black South African women in abusive relationships. Practice experience has shown us all that greater suc-

cess is achieved if primary service providers are members of the community of need. Persons who are not immediate members of the community serve as secondary resources, this has been the Miller role. Certainly, 9,971 contacts in one month provides some evidence of a successful endeavor.

In the present, however, MOSAIC is at great risk. It is without sufficient funding for continued training. In fact, training of a new groups has been postponed until January 1997. In the meantime there are 11 salaries to be paid to women who have completed training and are at work in the townships. The women of South Africa are beginning to make a difference in the quality of life in the beleaguered townships adjoining Cape Town. But, they need help if they are to continue.

I believe that Lulu Mzomba provides an appropriate ending for this commentary. "I was lucky to be accepted to the course its high time for women to stand up and have a say in South Africa. So now I will be able to help other women in the community especially in our townships the women are abused by men and they don't know where and what to do. The apartheid system made us live in fear all the years. I thank God for this course it opened my mind and gave me confidence." □

(Women's quotations were taken from a funding proposal "MOSAIC Training Service and Healing Centre for Women," September 1995. MOSAIC 512, 4 Church Street, Cape Town 8001)

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