

Vernie Naicker Constitutional Court Oral History Project

31st January 2012

Int This is an interview with Vernie Naicker and it's the 31st of January 2012. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the Constitutional Court Oral History Project, we really appreciate it.

VN Thank you.

Int I wondered if we could start at the very beginning, if you talk a bit about your background, family, where you grew up and what your experiences were growing up in South Africa, at the time that you did?

VN I am from Durban; Born in Durban in Shallcross. I am from a big family, seven kids, mum and dad. Second youngest. I moved to Johannesburg just a year after I completed Matric. It was very difficult finding a job. The background I came from we didn't have enough money for me to further my studies so I completed a very basic computer course I started at the Constitutional Court a month after I arrived in Johannesburg

Int ...What was the process of looking for a job? Did you know what you wanted to do? What were you thinking of?

VN At that stage, there wasn't many options, so I just did a basic computer course, very basic. I came up to Johannesburg and I went for I think, two interviews. It was difficult because they didn't want many people from Durban. Most females generally missed home after a few months and moved back. So, they weren't keen on employing me on. My oldest sister was working here at the Court at the time.

Int Oh, right, okay.

VN And she worked with the Registrar's Office.

Int Is that Maggie?

VN Maggie, yes (laughs). And she was working with the Registrar at that time, as a typist. When I visited her office, I was coming into the office to browse the newspapers for vacancies at that point, Maggie was also applying for a position with Justice O'Regan and that's when the Registrar said, if Maggie is taken by Justice O'Regan then the typist position can be mine. I started at the Court in January 1995. I was in Johannesburg since December 1994 and in

January 1995 I was employed at the Court, yes. (laughs). So, I was lucky in that way, ja.

Int And you worked in Braampark from '95 onwards until 2003?

VN Ja, that's where they were based across at the old office in Braampark ja.

Int And when you started, whom did you work for; how did it work, what were the different tasks that you were responsible for?

VN I had no experience at all. I started in the Registrar's Office as a typist. So basically did all their letters, correspondence, the filing. Pretty much ja, handling the Registrar's documents at that stage.

Int And this was for Martie Stander?

VN Martie Stander, yes (laughs). That was before the Registrar's office they have now. Now the Registrar's office is a little different from when I first started at the Court. It was very small that time. So it was just letters, correspondence, filing, just handling her work. I learned a lot because I had no experience, absolutely none.

Int And your memories of that Court when it started: what were some of the activities? Who were the people that you met? What was your interactions with the judges? I am curious to learn about your memories?

VN At that stage, it was very new. Didn't have much interaction with the Justices and Law Clerks at that time, whilst working at the Registrar's Office. I got to know a bit about the very new law clerks. A few of them. Justice (Ismail) Mahomed at that stage, just glimpses here and there of the Justices. I think, the highlight of that year when I started at the Court was when we started getting ready for the Inauguration. So, I was part of that, well just a little It was amazing. So, we did the invitations that were sent out. The Inauguration happened. I met (President Nelson) Mandela. Ahhh, it was awesome then. Ja, then I moved from there to Justice (Yvonne) Mokgoro.

Int At what point did you make the move; the transition to Justice (Yvonne) Mokgoro?

VN It was a year later.

Int Right...

- VN But a year later where I took up the position but...
- Int As her PA (Personal Assistant)?
- VN Yes. But a few months before that, I was assisting her before she could employ me in her office. She needed someone to assist her; I think at that time, her assistant, her PA (Personal Assistant) was not well. Not really sure but I was assisting her with her work. Then I took up the position a couple of months later I was working with her at the Court, ja.
- Int I also wondered if you could talk about that chamber? What was the nature of that chamber and what was the work ethic?
- VN Justice Mokgoro firstly wasn't just an employer, she was more like a mother figure to me, I was quite young. Very friendly, the people that I worked with in her chambers also with the law clerks, amazing. We got along very well. I interacted quite a lot with other institutions that she was a member of like the Law Commission. Her trips overseas to universities. She took up the Visitors Committee, I am not sure what its called now. The Library Committee, all these committees, which were just starting up at the Court at the time. So I played a part when they were just getting of the ground. I also typed out the long judgements maintaining the drafts of it, so ja amazing.
- Int In terms of the move to Braampark to this Court, what are your memories of that event and also what was it like working in this new building?
- VN The move went smoothly but before that we managed to get glimpses at that time the construction of this building was amazing. Amazing the building, the building was quite...just lovely. It was more transparent, I think (laughs)...
- Int Some people have said that it was less cosy than Braampark where you got to meet people more often? Was that the case for you?
- VN No, I liked it, its nice here, its open. Its...ja, I think its much better. Working behind closed doors and not being able to see...I think it is a little bit scary. Once everything is open, its nice, it's a nice feel...
- Int Right. Vernie...you mentioned the chambers as being amazing and a wonderful place but what were some of the things expected of you? How did Justice (Yvonne) Mokgoro work? Was she an organised person? What were some of the specific tasks that you had to do? And I am just curious about how you lent support, because your role was so vital?

VN In that office, I dealt with the filing of her documents, typing of speeches, making sure that her diary was run properly. Administrative things, telephone calls, making documents that come in and out, making sure they are properly...they seem to...she's on time for meetings...I would call her and tell her the day before...you have got such and such meetings the next day...that she's organised. The interaction between her and the law clerks, making sure that they are all on the same page.

Int How did you do that in making sure that everyone was on the same page?

VN For example: documents that came in, the law clerks would look at it first, sometimes I would file it, get it ready for her or sometimes the law clerks that came in would prepare the documentation. So, each set of law clerks would kind of work differently and find individual ways of doing things. It wasn't too much of a challenge. It was actually a change for me. So if they brought documents to me and I write it down in her notepad or notebooks and look through it, make sure that when they were going into court, that she had the whole pack, of documents, her notepad, her pens...just basically when she walks in, she's ready to go into the hearing.

Int I also wondered in terms of law clerks, did you have any say on who the law clerks would be...did she consult with you...?

VN Not really, no. They had huge sets of CVs of applicants, quite a lot of files. She would sift through them. She would shortlist just a few but I don't recall really having any say in that.

Int In terms of the other judges, particularly from '95 who were the other judges that you interacted more often with?

VN Justice (Kate) O'Regan, they sat on quite a few committees together. Justice (Tholie) Madala was also more like a father figure. Very sweet. Justice (Pius) Langa, a little bit as well because he used to come into the office to see her quite often. Justice (Albie) Sachs, I remember from all the tours he used to do and also they sat on the Committee together, the Visitors one. Who else can I recall, (Justice Ismail) Mahomed stay at the Court was very short. I only started getting to know him when he was diagnosed with cancer I didn't really interact with the Justices when I worked at the Registrar's office. Justice (Sandile) Ngcobo a little bit (laughs), Justice Skweyiya (laughs). There were bits of interaction with all of them at that stage. But Justice O'Regan. My sister worked with her.

Int In terms of the Artworks Committee, I know that...Yvonne (Mokgoro) was on that Committee and I wondered whether you were expected to do any extra

work related to the Artworks Committee? Whether you went on any tours, whether you were involved in any other way?

VN No. I am more of an introvert so I don't get myself out there (laughs). Wherever I can, I am behind closed doors (laughs). Though, if she requires me to do something that requires interacting with external people then I did so. But with the Artworks Committee, no. I think Justice (Albie) Sachs went more with it though she did sit on the Committee, I didn't...honestly, I didn't pay much of a role because Fatima Maal (Justice Sachs' Personal Assistant (PA, at the time) was excellent at it. She did a very good job as well (laughs), ja.

Int I also wondered in terms of your...interaction with the rest of management, you had known Martie Stander already. I wondered what your experiences were of the different management, the Court generally? Where there any challenges, any tensions?

VN If you interviewed Martie (Stander) already, you will find how sweet a person she is. I can't recall having any, any unsettling moments. She's a very understanding person, always willing to assist. At that stage, when I first started Martie (Stander) was the Registrar, she managed the Court at that stage by herself. Only much later, did Mr. (Vick) Misser start here. And not long after I left. But from the time I was here to the time I left, I didn't have any real major problems, no. The staff in those offices, the Registrar's Office they were also quite helpful. We did try to help each other, honestly. They needed assistance, I needed assistance, they were helpful to one another. No, I can't recall having any problems, no.

Int Vernie, you were here for twelve years. A long time (elicits laughter from both) to be at one place. I wondered what prompted your decision to depart, to leave for another job?

VN There was a good and bad, the bad was that at that point was that I was going through a separation, which I am now divorced. So, I felt that in terms of the finances I needed to move.

Int Sure...

VN The other reason was that Justice (Yvonne) Mokgoro's terms was coming closer to an end and I didn't see myself staying on without her here.

Int So, you have grown attached to her?

VN I had grown attached to her, she was more like a mother figure to me. I really did see her as that. I was able to speak to her about personal experiences, personal problems and she assisted me, in fact she was the one who actually pulled me out of my depressed state at the time when I separated from my husband. If it wasn't for her, I don't think I would have pulled through. It was difficult and she had another two or three years left here. I could have stayed on but I was hoping for her understanding and she was very caring. So, those were the two reasons and a week or two before I could leave, I worked with Justice (Sandile) Ngcobo and he sat with me and he said to me..."it's a good choice, you need to actually get out and experience the world and it's a good thing and also we should not be in a position for more than 5 years, we need to get more experience." And he was right because I am quite enjoying it. My stay at the Court has thought me quite a bit. In fact, this is where I developed myself. And to where I am with now, if it wasn't for this, the Court, I don't think I would be where I am now (laughs). Maybe...

Int Why do you say that?

VN The experience I got here I don't think I would gotten anywhere else. The understanding from Justice (Yvonne) Mokgoro. She was a brilliant boss. She was excellent.

Int Whenever I have seen her and people speak to me about her, they always describe her as very warm and also how elegant she is (elicits laughter from both).

VN Really! You know everyday her walking through the passage you would hear her footsteps, when she was walking because we didn't have carpets like this initially. And she will walk in, ahhh. A lady, a real lady. And she carried herself as such as well. Very, very smart and very caring. Very loving. I think anybody would be able to sit and talk to her. She was just that. She's still is. Ja, so...

Int Vernie, when you look back at the experience at the Court, what are the life lessons that you took away from your time at the Court?

VN The people. The staff...the Registrar's office very humble, I don't know if you have interviewed some of them. They are very humble people. And just to see that they make do and they carry themselves in such a smart, loving manner. Even Martie (Stander). Up to now. I saw her this morning and just the same. Nothing has changed. I think and hard working, you know. I still see some of the people that I first started with and they are still here. So, they look happy. So, can I complain, no. I think I took all of that with me and I still have it. I have the same wonderful surrounding that I had here as well.

Int From what I understand your sister has taken over from you to work with Justice (Yvonne) Mokgoro. Is that correct?

VN Yes (laughs), that's right. Tracy (Kisten). She started working with Justice Mokgoro when I left which was in October 2007. I was kind of jealous (laughs) but ja. I am sure she was the right person, as well. She is very kind, sweet as well just like Justice Mokgoro. She is still working with Justice Mokgoro at the Old Chief Justice offices in Fox Street, Johannesburg.

Int Office of the Chief Justice.

VN Yes.

Int I wondered Vernie, did you come back for the farewell, that...for Justice Mokgoro. Did you come for her farewell in 2008/?

VN 2008, I did come back for an event but not certain which one it was.

Int Was that the big event for the four judges at the time? Is that the one you are referring to?

VN I am not sure. I feel like its so long ago now. I am not quite certain which one it was.

Int What are your memories of the event that you came for?

VN I came in 2007, December. Where they had a Christmas function I am not sure whether it was a Christmas function or whether it was something where I was also leaving and they handed me a gift. I am sure it was 2007 in December sometime. For Justice (Yvonne) Mokgoro, I am not sure. I know one of the law clerks did send me an email but it never reached me. So, I don't think I came for that one, no.

Int Sure. I am wondering I have asked you so many questions, picking your brain on memories so far back... is there something that you would like to add to your oral history interview, to your oral history?

VN Just that my time here has been really amazing. I feel like it has been the highlight besides my kids, of my life (laughs). So, ja just want to thank the staff and everybody for having me here for that amount of time and Justice Mokgoro.

Int Vernie, it's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much.

VN Thank you

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