

# The Art Therapy Centre: A Portrait

NAOMI SAFRAN-HON '08

**T**o be creative a person must exist and have a feeling of existing, not in conscious awareness, but as a basic place to operate from. Creativity is then the doing that arises out of being. It indicates that he who is, is alive.

– W. D. Winnicott, *Essays by a Psychoanalyst*. New York: Norton, 1986, p. 39.



The summer of 2006 I spent in Johannesburg's dry winter. That summer/winter I got the opportunity to work at The Art Therapy Centre, a small NGO doing an ambitious job of contributing to the healing of the South African community. I was doing my internship with the Centre as part of my fellowship at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University.

The Art Therapy Centre works mainly with survivors of the Apartheid regime and offers healing in a social context. Although Apartheid was officially over with the first democratic elections in 1994, almost thirteen years ago, there is still a lot of need for emotional support. The Centre offers group counseling as well as training to people from the community to become art counselors.

This collection of photographs and personal stories brings together the people who make the Art Therapy Centre what it is. Without them, there would be no art and no healing. Their portraits and stories represent not only the Centre's work but also the story of South Africa. The anthropologist Lindsay French writes that photographs have a unique way of capturing reality:

*Photographs – especially portraits – really contain very little information. They cannot tell us very much. They are mostly suggestive – as Roland Barthes says, “Photographs make novelists of us all.” ... But photographs can suggest something ... They establish a human link with someone whose experience is distant from ours and difficult for us to imagine, and in that way bring us closer to something that is otherwise very hard to think about.<sup>1</sup>*

The portraits together with the written text try to capture the vibrant community which makes The Art Therapy Centre. At the same time, these people represent different segments of the society in South Africa. Hopefully, it will enable the reader to experience some of what is difficult to imagine.

Many people, including the staff and teachers of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, helped in making this project possible. To them and to the people who let me capture a part of their lives and soul by sharing their life stories and letting me take photographs for this project, I am thankful. I especially want to thank Danny Myburgh, who drove me all around Johannesburg and welcomed me into her life. I also thank Pam Allara, Daniel Terris, the ECSF of 2006, Marci McPhee, Alfredo Gisholt, Hannah Safran and Giora Hon, who helped me create this work

*The following portraits and narratives are part of a larger photography project.*



**Mokgadi Ratable,  
who lives with  
her three children  
in Hoodsport**

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## Hayley Berman

37 Galway Road  
Parkview

*Hayley Berman lives with her husband, son, daughter and two dogs.*

I grew up in Johannesburg, in a big house in Sandhurst, which at the time was like a remote suburb which is now the elite suburb, and it was a really lovely big, big thatch roofed house, with a big garden, lots of dogs, three sisters, mom and a dad, and I think I had a very privileged life. I think the fact that I had three older sisters was useful because they started asking the questions before I could start asking the questions. So I sort of understood from quite early, I think, what Apartheid was and what indoctrination was.

When I was in my matric, just before matric, when I was 17, I had a car accident. In the accident I broke my back and I was burnt so I was in hospital for about two months in traction, and so I missed my first term of school, really of my matric year. When I did go back to school, I didn't go to school much because I was having lots of operations and surgery. The power relations that I was sensitive to as a child around black and white, I sort of experienced as a patient in a hospital with doctors that didn't speak to me as a person but rather as an object or as a thing or talked past me or through my parents.

I had moved schools, so I was in King David School, which is a Jewish school. I went for my last two years, and it was the first time I had experienced any kind of liberal democratic thinking about the country or having a history teacher that was a politician and had done history at Wits. We used to go on marches as part of our history classes and deconstruct cartoons that were written by government, so it was a very exciting year. I had an art teacher who was British and really supported me making art as part of healing and understanding where I was coming from.

When I did art for matric, I got a distinction for art and got the art award and it was the first time that I sort of felt like I was – that my art had meaning. I think before that it was my sister who was the artist and I wasn't. I mean I didn't think I would pursue art. Then I knew about art therapy and did some. Even then I started reading books about art therapy and decided that was what I wanted to do. When I started my fine arts degree, I did it with the aim of becoming an art therapist and my initial interview was – I said I wanted to be an art therapist, and they said, "Well, by the time you finish, you will forget you ever wanted to do that." I didn't.

When I finished the training in London, I came back to South Africa. It was 1992. It was about coming back and sharing the work. I think it's always been from the beginning about creating spaces for people to create and be all they want to be and make it available and accessible to everybody.

The Art Therapy Centre was my studio; I just called it that because when I had to write for proposals or when I was asked to do a job I would have a letterhead that said Art Therapy Centre. So it was not formalized as an NGO. In 1994, I started training people and laying a foundation course in art therapy, and that is how the NGO came about.

*— From an interview with Hayley Berman  
21 July 2006*



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## Phumzile Rakosa

19 Moepel Street  
Elspark, Germiston

*Phumzile Rakosa lives with her two sons, Katheo and Siphwe, and her daughter, Lebohamb. (Phumzile's two nephews, Swazi and Lesego, are also in the photograph.)*

I was born and grew up in Soweto, Johannesburg. We were nine at home. There were a lot of us there and although we struggled, it was fun. It was a very notorious place to be in. So many things were happening in Soweto. It was a place with a lot of gangsters and riots. Everything that happened, happened in Soweto. We were always kept at home. We had to be home before six, because after that time it was very dangerous outside. We used to go to church on Sunday. That was our source of survival, which I think it still is. I go every Sunday to church; it is in Vosloorus, about ten kilometers from here. My priest has been a very important person in my life.

When I was doing Std 5, I was removed from Soweto to come to Vosloorus because it was very dangerous for me to stay in Soweto. Girls were raped and a lot of things were happening there so we had to move to Vosloorus. My sister got married and got a house, so I moved in with her and somehow raised by her until I finished college. I was doing a diploma in education. I met my husband at the college. We had children, got married and I stayed with him in Vosloorus.

We had a house in Vosloorus, and then he passed away in 1998. He was involved in a car accident. He was with my kids. I had two kids then and I was expecting my little girl. So he passed away during that time and both my children were injured in the accident. After he passed away I stayed for about three years in Vosloorus, and then in 2001 I moved to this house, because it was not easy for me to stay in that house. Because of him, knowing that he was there and he is not there anymore. Living here is very quiet. My life is mine, no one to intrude. I am just happy.

I got involved in the Art Therapy Centre immediately when my husband got injured in the accident. I was identified by the department of education to go there for a support group for educators. I went there for getting my own support, and when I got there I realized how it helped me and I felt like I needed to help others.

Before I went to art therapy I felt like I was alone and then all these things were happening to me because I was... I don't know how to put it, but I felt there was something wrong with me. But now after I have been to art therapy I realized that it was not only me. I would like to have more time to do art therapy, but I am finding it very difficult because I have to be an educator in the morning. I teach at school for children with mental illnesses in Katshehlong, and then in the afternoon I have to go to art spaces and work there. At the end of the day I get very tired, but because I am enjoying it I am not finding it hard for me to continue. I feel like if I could have more time; maybe I would leave teaching to do only art therapy. I think that it is what I do best and I know when I have touched those children's lives I can notice a difference.

— *From an interview with Phumzile Rakosa*  
11 July 2006



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## Danny Myburgh

10 Armhgh Road  
Parkview

*Danny Myburgh lives with her husband, two sons and four dogs.*

I was born in Cape Town but grew up in Johannesburg. I am a white South African. I have had a privileged upbringing and went to private schools. My parents were not supporters of the Nationalist Party and we were very critical of the politics in the country at the time. My parents were not activists but they were liberal, old fashioned liberal. So they criticized but did nothing.

I went to a white Afrikaans University. I studied law. It was in the early '80s and Apartheid was still very much entrenched, but there was a lot of resistance and the student organizations were active in resistance politics. I was a member of a number of student organizations, and that was very difficult because the student body supported the Apartheid government and friends of mine were very critical of what I had done and in retrospect I also realized that some of my class mates that befriended me were actually spies and they were trying to find out from me what was going on.

After I graduated I worked as a judge's clerk. I worked for a very enlightened judge called Judge Richard Goldstone. At the time he was known as a very liberal judge. Although he was enforcing the Apartheid legislation, if ever he could find a reason not to uphold it, he would, and it was very often based on some sort of international law. So I did that for about three years and then he went to the Appeal Court and I went and worked for the *Weekly Mail*. They were also a "resistance newspaper." There were lots and lots of censorship laws, so they had to abide by the censorship laws if they wanted to print, and they often got banned and they often got into trouble and they were often taken to court, and so I worked for them because I had a legal background.

I worked there until I had my first son, Simon. Three years later, Thomas was born in 1995. At that time I stopped working and concentrated more on my artwork. I painted for many years. And then at some stage, when Thomas was about 3, that was in 1998, I started teaching children art at my home. I was doing what I felt like doing, just being creative, having fun with them and in the process I noticed things about these kids that came up through their artwork.

Also I decided to go into therapy. Someone connected me with Hayley, and I became part of a group that did art therapy together. After about two years I realized that I wanted to be an art therapist. Up until then I had regarded it as my therapy. That is how I got involved with the center work.

At one point I put together a proposal. It was like a dream that I think that all children should have access to art therapy in schools because art therapy is able to address so many internal problems in a non-threatening way. That is the way that children relate to and I had done some research on what happens in community centers in England and I thought that this was what one should do in South African schools.

— *From an interview with Danny Myburgh*  
8 July 2006





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## Samuel Ntuli

612 Skozana Section  
Hospital Street, Katlehong  
1431

*Samuel Ntuli lives with his older brother.*

I grew up here in Katlehong in this house. I was born in a two-room house and we grew up in this house. We were five. Later on, my eldest sister assisted us to build two rooms, then it became four rooms, and when I started working, I was helped by my other sister to build the other two rooms that was outside. This is how we expanded.

Growing up in Katlehong has been wonderful, although there have been ups and downs when we grew up, later on, when there was violence in the late 90s. It was tough, very challenging growing up in the Apartheid situation. There was so much segregation and less opportunity, and so we black people couldn't do what we wanted to do at the time, and it was very difficult.

I started working at the age of 9 as a gardener as well as carrying parcels for people in town in order to get cash and bring it home. I was being supported by my mother who was a domestic servant, she worked in Germiston and Boksburg, but my sisters as well were working on part-time basis in some shops.

I did join the struggle but without my parents knowing that. They only knew later that I was part of the struggle. I was distributing the information for the organization for the student movement. I was a teenager then.

I was an angry young man. I was angry about the system because it prevented us being yourself and exploring in the way that you wanted to be and it is only now that, at my age, I can go back and do some of the things that I wanted to do.

It was only through art therapy that I realized my potential. Art therapy became a healing process for me. I got involved with the Centre in 1998. I was invited to attend a workshop where there was a discussion about art and art therapy at the school level. I loved it. Getting involved with the center brought quite a lot of understanding emotionally how you can live and how you can survive and you can change things for the better. I grew emotionally and there was a great shift in my emotional status.

We were too apart as a nation, so I have got a lot of white friends now as regard of being involved in the art therapy. If I was not involved in the art therapy I could not have met quite a lot of people that contributed to the change of my life. I was angry, but the anger slowly moved away and I could see life in a positive way.

— From an interview with Samuel Ntuli  
11 July 2006



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## Notes

1. French, Lindsay. "Exhibiting Terror." *In Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*. Mark Bradley and Patrice Petro, eds. Rutgers University Press, 2002.

