

*"If absence of war means boredom, then let us be bored stiff in our newsrooms rather than busy in killing fields again."*

## NATAL JOURNOS become journalists again

**LAKELA KAUNDA** says the election meant a new story in her province.

**A**NGELINA Mkhize has been a common sight on Pietermaritzburg's Fraser Lane for many years.

She is a ruffled old beggar who sits with a carton of milk on the lane every day asking passersby to give her some money. On April 26 this year I saw a different Angelina. She came running towards the *Natal Witness* team at an Edendale voting station shouting: "I have voted, I have voted. Please take a picture of me."

For once, Angelina the beggar was equal to every other South African. It was the most moving scene to witness.

For decades news has been made by important political and business leaders and famous socialites, not the likes of Angelina. The election taught journalists that the Angelinas also matter.

From a story point of view, the election in Natal can be described as having been an anti-climax. For months the atmosphere had been so highly charged in the province anything was expected to happen. The Inkatha Freedom Party was threatening civil war, the ANC and the National Party government responded with a state of emergency. More massacres followed the declaration. Natalians resigned themselves to one "fact"—there would be no life after the elections.

Newspaper managements and the South African Broadcasting Corporation bought bullet-proof vests for their staff and cars were fitted with two-way radios. SABC reporters were given cellular telephones to communicate with the office conveniently in times of emergency. Conversation in newsrooms boiled down to what type of shoes and clothes could facilitate quicker escape.

The *Witness* had organised a two-day safety course for reporters and photographers, teaching them everything from how

to detonate a hand grenade to what to wear in unrest situations and survive ambushes.

Suddenly, one Monday, things changed. The IFP announced that they would contest the elections and the atmosphere melted.

Worn-out Natal journalists who have been reporting about death and destruction for 10 years were more than relieved to see they did not have to duck bullets.

The election was good for journalism. It revived that aggressive curious go-getter spirit and for three days we said goodbye to deskbound journalism. Although it sounds awful, we had become tired of going out every day to interview widows, widowers and orphans. The story sounded the same everytime. So, it had to be a really big massacre that would get us out of the newsroom.

The election made Natal journalists journalists again. Colleagues would leave at dawn to go as far afield as Nkandla in Northern Zululand. The scenes were impressive. For once, the news was made by ordinary people and they all had moving stories to tell.

Understandably, voters interviewed in Natal queues had one wish — an end to violence.

Angelina was one of them. She used to have her own home in Table Mountain outside Pietermaritzburg. She fled when armed men went on a rampage three years ago. She has been homeless ever since and survives on begging.

Everywhere voters were keen to talk to journalists, and some did not keep their votes a secret. For some reason, ANC voters never called Mandela by name. The question: "Who did you vote for?" was met with "the old man of course".

Durban township Kwamashu had been the most violent in the run-up to the elections. Hostel dwellers had been clashing

with residents since they stopped the ANC from using the Princess Magogo Stadium in the area for a rally. Journalists covering elections there had brought their bullet-proof vests and first-aid kits.

On arrival, they found hostel dwellers and residents in the same queue chatting as if nothing had ever separated them. The same happened in Empangeni in Kwazulu.

Another nothing-happened type story came from Newcastle. Rightwingers had set up a mini-base in the centre of town and this increased tensions. Journos went flying there to see what the rightwingers would do to black voters. The rightwingers simply dismantled their camp and voting proceeded normally.

When it appeared that Inkatha was winning KwaZulu/Natal, we became apprehensive. Every opinion poll had tipped the ANC to win the province, and ANC leaders started crying fraud even before a final result was announced. ANC leaders Jacob Zuma and Harry Gwala announced that the organisation would go to court to prove the IFP committed fraud during the elections.

There was a fear that ANC supporters would take up arms. We went into ANC and IFP strongholds to get the mood. Again a surprise. ANC voters expressed their disappointment and said the IFP had cheated, but no-one said war was an option. IFP voters welcomed the national ANC victory.

Now the election is gone, so are the inaugurations and other colourful newsworthy events. It appears that Natal will now become just another boring province. However, if absence of war means boredom, then let us be bored stiff in our newsrooms rather than busy in killing fields again.

■ *Lakela Kaunda is political correspondent for the Natal Witness and a Rhodes journalism graduate.*