

# Parents of Slain Fulbright Scholar Embrace Her Cause in South Africa

**Amy Biehl's mother and father now work with two of her murderers**

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A few hundred yards from the spot where their daughter was murdered in Guguletu township, Linda and Peter Biehl park their car outside a cement-block house, fronted with screens of woven wattle brush.

They are shown into the living room, and soon a fox-faced young black man, Easy Mzikhona Nofomela, emerges from the back to greet them. Linda Biehl hugs the scrawny man and he beams as he affectionately calls her *Makhulu* -- the Xhosa word for grandmother. He greets Mr. Biehl as *Tatomakhulu*, or grandfather.

Mr. Nofomela was part of a mob that stoned and stabbed the Biehls' daughter, the Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl, to death in the township, a Cape Town suburb. Linda and Peter Biehl's embrace of Mr. Nofomela and another one of their daughter's murderers has drawn a new round of attention to the Biehls' philanthropic efforts in the wake of their daughter's death.

Ms. Biehl had been the valedictorian of her high-school class, in Santa Fe, N.M., and had gone on to do an honors thesis on Namibian independence at Stanford University. She had come to South Africa to help the country make the transition to democracy. She was based at the Community Law Centre at the University of the Western Cape and was conducting research on women and the creation of a new South African constitution.

On August 25, 1993, she was driving black friends home to Guguletu township when the car was attacked by a group of youths just out of a political meeting where they had been chanting "one settler, one bullet" -- urging death to all white citizens. The youths stoned the car and struck Ms. Biehl on the head. She fled, bleeding, but the youths cornered her and stabbed and stoned her to death, despite the pleas of her friends. She was 26 years old.

The racially motivated murder by militant members of the Pan Africanist Student Organization jolted the United States and South Africa, which was preparing for its first multiracial election. "She made our aspirations her own and lost her life in the turmoil of our transition," said Nelson Mandela, South Africa's president, in 1998.

Together with his neighbor, Ntobeko Peni, and two other youths, Mr. Nofomela was convicted of murdering Ms. Biehl. All four were sentenced to 18 years in prison. They spent four years in jail before receiving amnesty from the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission, formed to investigate human-rights violations in the apartheid era. The commission has awarded amnesty for many -- police officers, government officials, and anti-apartheid activists -- provided there was a political motivation for their actions.

The killers admitted they had attacked Ms. Biehl because she was white and because they viewed all whites as enemies of black Africans, although they did not realize she was American. The Pan Africanist Congress, a party to which the killers once belonged and that advocates radical redistribution of land in South Africa, has called the murder an error.

Today two of the murderers, Mr. Nofomela and Mr. Peni, work for the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust, acting as guards for the delivery trucks that distribute bread from one of two bakeries started by the trust. The bakeries provide bread at lower cost than other outlets and income for those who bake and distribute the bread across the townships. The loaves of Amy's Bread of Hope and Peace have wrappers with educational messages about how to prevent AIDS.

Peter and Linda Biehl started the trust in 1997 as a living memorial to their daughter's beliefs, and the bakeries are among some 30 programs supported by the trust. So far about 40 undergraduates and M.B.A. students from Duke University, the University of California at Irvine, and the Wharton business school have worked as interns at the trust.

The other programs supported by the trust include music courses, job-creation projects, a golf-driving range, and after-school care. Many of the programs are aimed at educating and upgrading the skills of poverty-stricken youngsters, giving them role models, and preventing them from turning to violence and crime.

Mrs. Biehl, who once ran an American Indian art gallery in Santa Fe, says: "The richness and the joy of the work is really working with people in the townships."

Guguletu means "our pride" but is one of the most desolate, crime-ridden suburbs in South Africa. Established during the apartheid years as a segregated black ghetto, the crude cement-block houses and flats of long-term residents have been engulfed by the corrugated iron shanties of thousands of migrants seeking work in the city. Rape, robbery, and gang violence are rife. The murder rate in Guguletu and surrounding black townships is reportedly the highest in South Africa, and a recent survey found the majority of homicide victims are young black men.

Mr. Nofomela, who was brought up in Guguletu, admits that working with the trust is strange, given his role in Amy's death. "But at that time I was young and under the influence of the P.A.C. [Pan Africanist Congress]. Now it's democracy, and we understand each other. I'm happy, I'm free, I'm normal, I'm positive because of *Makhulu* and *Tatomakhulu* -- they make me strong."

Mrs. Biehl believes Mr. Nofomela and Mr. Peni were caught up in mob violence as a result of apartheid and propaganda by P.A.C. politicians. "I thought of them as young people used in a situation, in a horrible system."

After receiving amnesty, the two men approached the Biehls because they wanted the Biehls to attend the first meeting of a youth group they had started for 30 local teenagers. The Biehls were "very impressed" and assisted by providing T-shirts for members and helping to arrange outings. Admiring the organizational ability of the street-smart men, the Biehls later decided to employ them in the bakery project and have also socialized with them.

"I feel very close to Amy when I'm with them," says Mrs. Biehl. She sees the two as thoughtful philosophers, trying to resolve the problems of their community. "If they can become self-sustaining people, they can be role models that young people can look to in the future."

Peter Biehl, a marketing consultant, recalls that he was excited about meeting the two men. At their amnesty hearing he didn't directly argue for their release but indicated that he and his wife were willing to abide by the South African amnesty process. He talked about his daughter's work on behalf of women and children and said her legacy was as "an advocate of human rights."

Mr. Nofomela and Mr. Peni have agreed not to use guns while guarding the delivery trucks. "We explained to people that it's useless to rob this project because it is a community bakery," Mr. Nofomela says. Each year on the anniversary of Ms. Biehl's death, Mr. Nofomela's youth group helps to hand out 2,500 free loaves of bread around Guguletu and other townships.

Mrs. Biehl insists that her daughter was not naive and was thoroughly aware of the risks of working in South Africa. "She could have described the young people that killed her and what it was like to be disenfranchised," she says. "She talked about the angry young men, but Peter and I didn't expect her to get killed."

After graduating from Stanford, Amy Biehl had worked in a Congressional office and in Burundi, the Congo Republic, Guyana, South Africa, Suriname, and Zambia, for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, a nonprofit, Washington-based organization that promotes democracy. As a Fulbright scholar in South Africa, she worked with academics and community leaders who are now senior government officials. She was killed two days before she was scheduled to fly back to the United States to begin a Ph.D. program in political science at Rutgers University.

After visiting South Africa and attending parts of the murderers' trial, the Biehls decided that the best way to continue their daughter's legacy was to try to change the social conditions that had led to her murder. Mrs. Biehl says: "I don't think it's turning the other cheek. It's digging in and doing something." The Biehls started a charitable foundation in the United States and a trust in South Africa, which has since been given \$2.3-million by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The Biehls decided to start their work in Guguletu. "We had met many people in Guguletu -- they had embraced us and Amy's blood was there," Mrs. Biehl says. "We decided to work with kids and prevent them going to prison and joining gangs."

The programs are intended to weave a safety net against violence. Victor West, an ambulance driver who arrived too late to save Ms. Biehl's life, has helped. He says

he was bothered that someone so innocent-looking was killed so brutally and by criticism of the amount of time it took the ambulance to arrive at the scene. Together with a colleague he has taught first aid to thousands of people, in hopes of saving other lives.

Earlier in the same morning that the Biehls visited Mr. Nofomela's house, they drove through streets lined with crude tin shanties and littered with discarded tires and rubbish to visit some of the trust's projects. In crime-ridden areas where few white South Africans usually dare to venture, they were greeted with warmth and delight.

The trust's biggest project, in a settlement near Guguletu, is the Buthisizwe Centre, a decaying factory building that the trust intends to renovate. Buthisizwe means "uplift the nation." Training and jobs will be provided in crafts and light industrial work, such as welding. An organic farm and a produce market will be established, and concrete-block-making, carpentry, and metal-working workshops will be set up. The center will offer classes in drama, music, and art, and serve as a venue for performances. The Biehls hope the center will also become a tourist attraction.

Outside the Buthisizwe Centre, the Biehls were welcomed by genial silver-haired Harry Mapempeni, an 84-year-old cleaner. Mrs. Biehl says: "We want to create a museum where we can get Harry's story and that of other people told." They hope University of the Western Cape students will do an oral history project so accounts of life in the townships under apartheid can be preserved.

In the sewing workshop, where ancient hand-powered machines have been restored, groups of men and women cut cloth and make briefcases, aprons, and pillowcases decorated with beads and African wildlife appliques. Nofirst Thobeka Mzayiya, designer in charge, says, in somewhat halting English, "We are happy to meet the Amy Biehl Foundation because everything is now better than before." The workers used to make their money selling clothing in the street. Now they are paid salaries, and their products are marketed abroad.

On a bulletin board outside, Mrs. Biehl points out pictures of three American students -- two from Duke University and one from the University of California at Irvine. The interns cleaned and painted the workshop and helped organize it as a business.

Conic Mkefa, manager in charge of manufacturing at Buthisizwe, says the students were a great help. "We picked up a lot of skills and ideas from them."

A few miles away, some undulating dunes have been seeded with grass to provide the first golf-driving range for residents of the vast black Khayelitsha township and the nearby suburb of Mitchells Plain, reserved under apartheid for those of mixed-race descent.

A clubhouse is still under construction, but already the local youngsters, who idolize Tiger Woods, are enthusiastically whacking buckets of balls into the greened dunes.

Like many of the trust's programs, the idea for the range came from the community. Thembisile Gamzane, a local volunteer who coaches children, asked the Biehls to construct a driving range for the "hidden golfers of Khayelitsha": residents who

played on the local soccer field because there was no other place. A tall, personable man, Mr. Gamzane says, "This is a starting point towards establishing something positive in the community and drawing in the youth."

Some of the trust's efforts have been marred by violence. Recently a guard at the golf course was shot dead. One of the trust's bakeries was destroyed by arson, the other one robbed. A few weeks before the Biehls' visit, two trust workers had been held up at gunpoint at a school while their car was stolen.

At the start of the morning, Mr. Biehl was called to the Guguletu police station, where a student intern and a middle-aged American volunteer were reporting the theft at gunpoint of their purses, a camera, and a cell phone. The volunteers had been setting up tables in a Guguletu sports stadium for the Amy Biehl Fun Run the following day.

On the way to the police station, where his daughter's body had been brought seven years earlier, Mr. Biehl described the crime level as "disgusting." Mrs. Biehl said it was frightening, but not directed at the trust: "It's random violence, not necessarily a white and black thing."

When Sufia Dadabhai, a 20-year-old student intern from Stanford University, emerged from an office in the station, she appeared fairly nonchalant. "We were arranging tables when these two gentlemen came up with firearms and just asked for our money," she said. "They were desperate for cash." She said she was frightened when the men drew pistols. "The first thing that came to my mind was 'This is how Amy was killed.' The foundation is my life here, and I am here in her name." However, the two polite robbers "made it clear they were not intending to hurt us."

In the six months she spent in South Africa, Ms. Dadabhai started an AIDS program in which high-school students educated their peers about AIDS and organized after-school care. What she enjoys most is the "vibe in the township."

"In the face of tons of poverty and tons of violence, people manage to live happy lives," she said. "I've learned a lot more from the laughter and the smiles here than from the violence. I feel comfortable in the townships."

Ms. Dadabhai, a senior who is majoring in human biology and religious studies, said she felt lucky that she was safe.

She could leave the township in 10 minutes, she said, but for residents, crime was an ever-present reality. "This doesn't change my commitment to the country and to the foundation. I'm coming back tomorrow for the Fun Run."

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