

**Black Liberations Movement Mosaic**  
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Oral History Interview  
with  
Mrs. Ntsiki Biko  
By Kyle Coston  
King William's Town, South Africa  
August 13, 2008

Interview with Mrs. Ntsiki Biko

Interviewed on August 13, 2008

Location: Childhood home of Steve Biko, King William's Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Interviewer: Max Paschall

Transcriber: Ryan Koons

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Black Liberation Movements Mosaic

Kyle Coston: Okay, today is August 13, 2008, Wednesday. We're at the Steve Biko home. My name is Kyle Coston. Could you introduce yourself, please?

Ntsiki Biko: My name is Ntsiki Biko.

Kyle Coston: Okay.

Ntsiki Biko: Call me Ntsiki or Mama Ntsiki

Kyle Coston: Mama Ntsiki?

Ntsiki Biko: Yeah.

Kyle Coston: Okay, I guess I just want to start off by asking you just to tell us a little bit about your early life, growing up I guess.

Ntsiki Biko: Oh, I was actually born in Transkei, in a place called Libode in the district of Umtata. I'm the last born in a family of 5: 4 ladies and 1 man, who passed away. I was a bit spoiled because I was the last born, and I got my education—secondary education that was called then—in a place that was called [incomprehensible], and I did my matric at [incomprehensible]. And thereafter, because my friends had applied to do nothing, I also followed suit, although my family did not want me to do that; they wanted me to further my studies. But I managed to get a vacancy at a hospital in Durban called King Edward Hospital, so I did my training there—my general training—and my midwifery training in Durban.

Kyle Coston: Okay, what were your first experiences with apartheid?

Ntsiki Biko: My... well, apartheid has always been there. We grew up under apartheid conditions. Aware; for instance, our parents were either maids or garden men, but I was fortunate enough because both my parents were professional teachers, but we've grown up within this apartheid system where whites were dominating us as blacks, so it has long been there – long been there.

Kyle Coston: How did you first meet Mr. Biko?

Ntsiki Biko: What?

Kyle Coston: How did you first meet Mr. Biko?

Ntsiki Biko: (laughs) It's a question I'm always asked. I first met this guy in Durban, when I was doing this training. He happened to be at the medical school, and my sister? was also a student at the medical school. So, he used to, when he's going to the medical school, pass the corridor that was going up to the medical school. He was passing, you know, through a ward where I was working. So, because he was friendly to my sister, so they used to come and say, "hi hihhi" and later on he used to come alone now, bring a bar of chocolate or something nice. And even then he was just a friend, well of course as a young lady I had my own things, I was doing my own things, but he used to visit me, sometimes finds me with this guy, and this guy was not suspicious because he a friend, you know, to my sister. But later on something developed, and we got involved. So this is how we met.

Kyle Coston: How would you describe him when you first met him?

Ntsiki Biko: This guy, he was, he was not very handsome I must say.

Kyle Coston: [Laughs]

Ntsiki Biko: He was a lovely man; the person I was going out with was a handsome guy, wealthy, there were businesses in his, [inaudible], home. But this guy was just a student and obviously coming from a home that was not rich. But somehow there's that thing that attracted one another. So he was attracted to me, and I also was attracted to him—I just loved the man. And at this stage he was involved in student politics. You know, as a young lady or young people who are in love, you would expect that if your boyfriend says he'll be coming to visit you or take you to the cinema, he would come. Sometimes he would promise to come, "I will come, my dear, I will be coming to pick you up for the weekend." And the next thing he would phone to say, "My dear, can we meet at the railway station?" Ah—what's happening now? "No I've got to go and deliver a paper in Johannesburg." So those days flies were, you know, there was no money to fly. So it's either you use a train or a bus or a taxi. So I accepted him as that. I knew he was a guy who was deeply involved in this fight to work towards liberating the black people.

Kyle Coston: Did he ever say how he got involved in politics?

Ntsiki Biko: Well, I actually got that from his brother Kaye, his only brother, his elder brother, who also passed on. Kaye was deeply involved in politics within the Pan Africanist Congress, PAC; he was a student and Steve was also a student there. And Kaye and the rest of the guys were arrested—they were detained—for their political involvement. And I think it was then that arose Steve's thinking, because Kaye used to put it this way, he says "the sleeping tiger was awoken", I mean because he was not interested in any politics, but because his brother was detained he also, you know, started, you know, thinking about the system that was there then.

Kyle Coston: Yeah.

Ntsiki Biko: And he was also excluded from [incomprehensible].

Kyle Coston: What do you think made Steve Biko so unique, in the sense that why do you think Steve Biko stood out in comparison to maybe some of the other people that were involved?

Ntsiki Biko: Mmmm, Steve was, I think he was just a gifted person. In this that I always said even the name that was given by his parents: Bantu—Bantu meaning people—because he was able to reach out to the older people, who are older than him. Also able to reach out with the younger people, so he was able to mingle with the different ages, different... whatever. So he was able to sit down and talk sense. If he comes to younger kids, he will behave like young kids. So I think that was the gift, I think, he got from God, so he would be able to do work with all sorts of people.

Kyle Coston: Did Steve Biko ever talk about—I know you mentioned his brother being really significant—did he talk about anyone else who might have inspired him?

Ntsiki Biko: I think he was also inspired by people like [Nelson] Mandela, and I know [Robert] Sobukwe; yeah, Sobukwe also played a major role. And he was reading a lot of books, for instance (inaudible) and other... he was reading quite a lot.

Kyle Coston: Are those some of the books that he read in that room back there?

Ntsiki Biko: [Laughs] Well, how did you know that? Yes. Yes, yeah, yeah, he used to love reading. So, any type of book that he comes across.

Kyle Coston: So, what was it like being married to a leader?

Ntsiki Biko: I married to a guy not knowing that he was a leader, he was just a man like any man to me. But I could see that there was something that was driving him to want to work with and for the people. So much that, most of the time you would find that even the family was not coming first. People were coming first. I'll give you just an example of what I am saying: sometimes, you know, when we were staying here when we got banned in 1973, we stayed here with my mother-in-law because we were in Durban; he was house arrested and brought back here. So people would come with problems. He'd be money problems or family problems. But if somebody comes, for instance, to say, "I've got a problem at home, I don't have money. I need to send my child to school," or "I haven't got food at home." You know what used to do? He would take our bags and actually empty our bags. If you, for instance, he would say "I don't have much in my bags." So he'll take the bag, empty the bag, so that he gets whatever he can get to help that person. So, he was always, he was always wanting to do something for people.

Kyle Coston: How did Steve Biko cope during the time of his, when he was banned.

Ntsiki Biko: Well, that didn't affect him, he was, as far as he's concerned, he's not banned. I mean he's going to do whatever he wants to do; of course because of the police surveillance that was happening, it was actually preventing him to do most of the things he would have loved to do. For instance he was not allowed to go to church where there's a group of people or go to schools, because they were seeing he's going to teach people or teach students politics there, so that was one of the conditions of his banning order. He was not allowed to have more than two people at a time, but the advantage about us being here at home was that we were staying here with the rest of the family, so nobody would say those visitors were coming to him, per se. So, but he just took a banning order as if it's nothing existing. He was just continuing, and hence most of the time he would be charged by the security police for intervening his banning order. But most of those cases he won. Sometimes he would engage a lawyer. I remember the lawyer he had was a lawyer from Grahamstown, and he would come here if the case is to be the following day. But at the end of the day when we go to court Steve would defend himself and the lawyer would just be sitting there and Steve would be defending himself. So, it just didn't affect him that he was banned. It did affect him in this: that he was not able to travel to places he would have loved to go. But somehow he used to peep out and go to wherever hence he went to Cape Town, to meet the leaders of the political organizations and finally got arrested because he was not supposed to have been there.

Kyle Coston: Did Steve have a close circle of friends, like, I guess, any people that really, he, I guess, fell back on, that was his support?



Ntsiki Biko: A lot. A lot of his friends. In fact, when you talk about Steve, there are a lot of people around him, you know, who were there. Students that he was with, with him, at school, at varsity, people that he met during the [inaudible], meetings with other students as well. So he had white friends as well, people like Donald Woods and Father Aelred Stubbs, because I always say to people, because the people that have, some people have that thing that says “Steve didn’t like whites” I always say “No, you don’t know him,” because we’re having people here—white people—coming here in this house and actually sleeping here because of Steve.

Kyle Coston: So, were you yourself involved in politics?

Ntsiki Biko: Not at all. No, no, I was not. I considered it in my [inaudible] for it, so politics was not my line.

Kyle Coston: So what of impact did, I guess, Steve being so involved, what kind of impact did that have on the family?

Ntsiki Biko: On the family, well, it was really hard. I must say, because at first when we’re in Durban, I was working, and after he was excluded from the University, he was not working. So I had to support the family. And then later on he got work with an organization in Durban, which was led by a certain professor [unknown name], who is now one of the board members of the Steve Biko Foundation. And they started some projects—development projects there. So he got a job there. And he does not belong after he had started working there—he got banned, he came here, and it was not easy for him to get a job, because the security was saying there was no way

he can get a job here. And I also suffered, because I had left my job in Durban, came here, couldn't get a job too, because each time I go and apply, the next thing I am waiting for, for, you know, for, for a reply. I would be called and said "No, no, we are not taking you." And the security had been to that place. So we suffered, I mean, you had, you know it's nice to have a closely-knit family, it was, you know, helping me. My brother was a doctor. Until I got a job in a place called [inaudible], St. Matthew's Hospital, so I started working there, so I had to support the family, and then he started the projects at Leopold Street—I'm not sure if you have been there.

Kyle Coston: No, I don't think so.

Ntsiki Biko: Yeah, I think they, I will tell these guys to take you to these places. So he started with the projects, so there was some money that was coming no matter how small. So, it was not easy I must say.

Kyle Coston: So, about these projects, how successful do you think, well, first of all, what were some of the projects and how successful do you think they were within the community?

Ntsiki Biko: You know, I told you that Steve was somebody was able to talk, you know, to talk to people. So he was able to fundraise money. One, there was a project here in Ginsberg—an educational project. His main concern was that in Ginsberg during that time there was only one graduate student; that was a certain Mr. Mangcu— [incomprehensible] Mangcu, who happens to be brother to Doctor [incomprehensible] Mangcu. So he was the only graduate here, so that was

worrying Steve a lot, so he raised money and he established a Ginsberg educational trust fund. And that educated most of the children, because Ginsberg is a community, has got a community that's not rich, or mostly unemployed people. But from that trust I'm glad to say most of the people who got that bursary are well-off now in this that they're well-educated, produced mayors in this, in this, [incomprehensible], in this, from this, from this...trust. And some of them are working within the government. That was one project. And then the second one was the health project at Zanempilo. Zanempilo Clinic, which was catering for clients from rural areas around that clinic, because they are far from town where there is a hospital. And clinics, you find that somebody has got to travel long distances before one gets to a clinic. So, by opening that hospital, mini-hospital, or clinic, people were able to be brought there because there were ambulances and those transports that was actually picking them and then there were also out-stations where nurses and doctors would go out to those clinics [incomprehensible] able to come. And also there, there was maternity section, and I know of a guy—the first delivery there at that clinic—his name is Zanempilo. He is now working at the Premier['s] office here in Bhishe. And then the other project that he raised funds for was Zimele Trust. Zimele Trust was mainly for families of political detainees because at that time, if you were involved, were either detained indefinitely, and there was an act at that time that was Terrorism Act, where you would be detained indefinitely and you'd just be interrogated, this is how most of our comrades lost their lives because they were beaten by police there and died most of them. So that trust fund was catering for their families. [Incomprehensible] in detention because some of them were working, at least the families who could carry on with their daily [imcomprehensible]. Mmm, what else was there... and he developed some Cooperatives as well. For instance, there was a women's cooperative here, because as I indicated to you that Ginsberg is... poor communities are living

here. So women would come together and contribute a small, small amount of money and then they would go and buy groceries from a wholesaler and they'd come and divide at least... at least most of the families were able to have food for their families. And another project was a leather project in Middledrift. There, you know that created a lot of jobs for communities in those areas. [Incomprehensible] community at least were working there, and in Middledrift they were doing leather projects like bags, shoes, shoes that were... that you're wearing like those they're made there. Belts, bags, and everything. But all those projects, I'm sure I'm forgetting others, but they were programs and were running from the office here at 15 Leopold Street. But all those, uh, on October 18, when the government clamped down on all the political organizations. Those were, the monies that were there were confiscated by the regime at the time. So everything just... went down.

Kyle Coston: We were talking a little bit about, you talked about the women's project. What was the role that women played within the movement? I think you find that you don't hear as much about that, about women's role within the movement.

Ntsiki Biko: Well, women were involved mostly in ANC. And the women that I know of were involved in student politics then. Yeah, it's mostly ANC women that played an important role.

Kyle Coston: How did Steve Biko develop his ideas in terms of the philosophy he came up with, Black Consciousness?

Ntsiki Biko: The philosophy of Black Consciousness is not, I don't think it's only Steve's idea. It's a collective. Because there were people like Pityana—Barney Pityana—there. Those people were the ones who were, I remember when I used to visit Steve, they would sit in his room the whole night discussing issues. So I think it was a collective. [coughs]. So, the idea... yeah, of course, Steve was the leading person, but it's just a collective.

Kyle Coston: Do you think King William's Town at all played an important role in fostering, I guess, this philosophy?

Ntsiki Biko: Well it started in Durban, I would say.

Kyle Coston: Okay.

Ntsiki Biko: It started in Durban during the time of student's politics.

Kyle Coston: How did Mr. Biko's involvement in the Black Consciousness Movement affect his academic career?

Ntsiki Biko: [Laughs] It affected it. It affected his career because, you know, I always used to say to him, um, in the first place I don't think the... medicine that he was studying, he would become a good doctor. He was scared of people who are bleeding and was, you know, he wouldn't come near a person who was sick, you know? So I used to say "I'm not sure if you've taken the correct career." In it he was a clever man, that's one thing. But, because I think he

was becoming a nuisance at the university[of Natal], they wanted to get rid of him, so because they...the reason was that he had failed his third year, so he was excluded.

Kyle Coston: Yeah.

Ntsiki Biko: We, I knew very well that no, I think that they had had enough of him because he had converted the students at the university, you know. So, when he was excluded, I was still working at King Edward Hospital, I remember, I think he was excluded the previous day, and then the following day I was called at the matron's office. And this matron says to me "Well, well I understand you're married now." So I said, "Yes." So, "Your husband is here at the medical school as well." "Oh yes, yes, he is there." I didn't want to tell her that he has been excluded [incomprehensible]. So, she says to me, "Well, I'm sorry that I've got to break this news to you, but I've got bad news for you." You know that there was a hospital in Durban called King George. King George was closing down, so I was, I was temporarily employed in King Edward with some other nurses, and now King George was closing so they were going to absorb those nurses from King George to King William's... to King Edward. So, this matron says, "Well now, all those people who are employed here temporarily are going to make way for people who were permanent at King George. So, you are one of the people who are going to go, you are terminated with others." I said, "Oh, okay." You know, after having questioned me about myself, Biko, and so on. So I just phoned Steve and said, "Hey guy, I've been terminated here." So he said, "Oh, okay, fine. I'll organize transport to come and fetch you with your belongings." And then I asked the other nurses that I knew that were also temporary. They said, "Well, we're called too." How I said "okay, fine, it is genuine." And then two weeks later, I

visited the hospital to find that all those people that were terminated with me were back at work. So I was the only one who was, you know, not taken so. But, yeah. That was that.

Kyle Coston: So, what did Black Consciousness mean to you personally?

Ntsiki Biko: Black Consciousness... to me, you know, it gave me that lesson that we, as blacks, in the first place, we must be proud of who we are. I remember, I used to say to his friends when he talks, he says, you know, "I always just talk about black, black is beautiful, and this and this, but I'm bringing an example of what I am saying: here is my wife." You know, he's actually [laughs]. So, it opened people's minds to the fact that we mustn't feel inferior, as if we don't exist. Because for a long time, black people were thinking that, because we are black, therefore we are inferior to, you know, to other people. So, it opened, like, for instance, I gave an example of our parents who were either maids or gardeners, who were made to address even a young white boy as "madam" or "sir" or whatever. So that opened people's minds to the fact that we are also human, we are human beings, you know, you were created by God, we must just live equally, and not one being... one dominating the other.

Kyle Coston: Yeah. [Pause] So what do you think Steve Biko would say about the current state, right now, of the country?

Ntsiki Biko: Well, I think he would be happy that at least we got the freedom. But, there are still challenges that he wouldn't be happy with. One: corruption. A lot of corruption that is happening around it's... I mean he would never take it. Because I think what is happening now,

people were fighting for this freedom. Most of them, you know, it seems as if they're fighting for their own, you know, benefits, and not for the benefit of other people who actually put them where they are today. So corruption is one of them, and, umm, but other things, I think let's just give them some time.

Kyle Coston: Yeah.

Ntsiki Biko: I mean, well, democracy... we've been in this democracy for some time but there are still challenges that we are faced with.

Kyle Coston: What were the most difficult times of your life, with Steve Biko or without?

Ntsiki Biko: Well, the most difficult time was after his death. Because I was left with two young kids to bring up, and it was just not easy. I mean, my eldest son, for instance, was six years old when his father died and the second eldest was, he always corrects me because I always say two years and he says "I was a year and some months more." So it was not easy because I had to bring up the two boys without their father, but... here we are. God gave me strength. I continued working, there were some people who were saying "Oh no, Ntsiki is getting support from the government." I said, "I wish." Yeah, but I managed to take them to school and to varsity and they're men now, so they... yeah.

Kyle Coston: How did you raise your children after Mr. Biko's murder?



Ntsiki Biko: Well, with the support of my family. Both my own family and Steve's family were able to, they grew up well unlike other kids who could afford whatever they wanted. They didn't afford, you know, everything. I couldn't afford to give them any, you know, some of the things that other kids were getting. I remember for instance, I remember they were schooling in a school in Transkei, and I was driving an old Toyota Sprinter car, so whenever I get there, [my son] Nkosinathi [Biko] would say, I would get there – the place is in Transkei – so I drive from King William's Town to a place called [incomprehensible] in Transkei, and I would be the first one to get there, so I park my car next to the gate, and he would say, "Just remove it. Go and park it somewhere, you know, behind," because, you know, parents who come here are driving Mercedes Benz and posh cars, so I used to say "My child, you will buy a Mercedes Benz." So, they couldn't afford, you know, to get what whatever they wanted, but they were very understanding.

Kyle Coston: So, looking back on your life, what could you say is one of your most proudest moments?

Ntsiki Biko: Proudest?

Kyle Coston: Proudest.

Ntsiki Biko: Well, my proudest moment was when I saw my kids growing up as men. And, I could see that they wanted to continue with their father's legacy. And when I said to [my son] Nkosinathi, because he had, Nkosinathi had to grow up very fast, to take over the, you know, the

responsibilities. So, when I said to him “You know, Nkosinathi, so many people have been establishing, you know, things about Steve. And then, nothing comes, you know, to continue with Steve’s legacy. I think let’s try and do something about this as the family.” It’s then that we visited the U.S., we went to Atlanta, Minnesota, Minneapolis, we just wanted to see what the other foundations were doing, and then we established the [Steve Biko] Foundation, so that’s one thing that makes me proud, because at least we are able to continue with Steve’s legacy.

Kyle Coston: So, what would you say about these, the statues they have of Steve Biko?

Ntsiki Biko: Well, the statue, I’ll talk about the statue in East London. Donald Woods and his friends in London, because Donald Woods was coming from East London, he was staying in East London before he went into exile. So, he said he wanted to erect the statue in East London, where he comes from, and also to rename a bridge which was [incomprehensible] Foster Bridge, in East London, and rename it, you know, Biko Bridge. So I said, “Well, it’s fine.” I mean, we didn’t, you know, we didn’t... oppose that. That was in 1997. And then, the Municipality of East London did that project with Donald Woods, and then King William’s Town Municipality called me and my brother-in-law, “No, you shouldn’t have allowed this statue to go to East London because Steve comes from King William’s Town.” But I said, “Guys, if you want a statue, you can erect one.” I mean, I was not in a position to say to Donald, “No, with your funds I want this statue there, in King William’s Town.” So the King William’s Town Municipality said, “Okay, we want to erect, you know, something there at the grave. At Steve’s grave.” So we said, “No, Steve won’t like it that way. If you want to do anything for Steve, you’d do it for all those people who are lying in that cemetery.” Otherwise, Steve was not the type who

would like to be seen alone. His mentors, his teachers, parents are lying there with him. So we said, “No, if you want to do anything we’d rather do something for all those people who are lying there.” Hence, they erected a wall around there and that place was named the Steve Biko Garden of Remembrance.

Kyle Coston: Do you remember any liberation songs?

Ntsiki Biko: [Laughs]

Kyle Coston: And if you do, would you mind singing a little bit of one, if that’s okay?

Ntsiki Biko: [Sings]

Kyle Coston: [Laughs] Alright, thank you. What do you think music meant to the struggle?

Ntsiki Biko: Music was also, I think, one of the liberating factors, I would say. When things were bad, and we started to sing, you know, you’d start relaxing. It was somehow relaxing people.

Kyle Coston: Do you think today’s youth value the anti-apartheid struggle?

Ntsiki Biko: Oh god, I [incomprehensible] could ask them. There are, there is that youth that is trying very hard. Very hard. But I think there is another section of youth that think that

liberation means that you do as you please. Because I think it is very important for the youth to actually...get themselves educated. Education is very vital to them. Because these days you find that most of the youth, well, I can't believe the others because they are educated but they don't get jobs. But I think education is very important, is very important for the youth. I know there are those serious people within the youth who know exactly, you know, what they want to do about the whole situation. I wouldn't say when I talk to the youth that... I think this country will be in a better situation if your youth know, you know, that they lead the way.

Kyle Coston: Yeah.

Ntsiki Biko: Because most of the young people, I mean, I think [incomprehensible] are finished with them. They just need now to be directed themselves.

Kyle Coston: So, what's it like coming back here and, I guess, doing these interviews and... talking to people... about Steve Biko.

Ntsiki Biko: [Incomprehensible]?

Kyle Coston: What's it like coming back here to this house?

Ntsiki Biko: Well, this happens almost every day, so much that in trying [incomprehensible] for me to allow this interview because I've handed over everything to my son now, I've been doing these interviews since Steve's death, and, so, it's something that I just feel, you know,

sometimes, especially for people who come from afar. You know, I just do them, but I, I seldom do interviews these days, I mean, I've handed over to my son, who is the CEO of the foundation and fortunately is coming tomorrow. So....

Kyle Coston: Wow, I'm glad that you came here today. Just one last question: what music were you listening to during the BCM movement?

Ntsiki Biko: What music was that? Well all sorts of music – jazz... [incomprehensible], ja, all types of music. Well, I just love music, I'm, but the music that I love most now is choral, I don't know if you've ever heard choral. I'm involved with a choir right now... we are preparing to go for competitions in Port Elizabeth, on, we're leaving with a group on Friday for competitions on Saturday. So I love choral music.

Kyle Coston: Alright, well that's all the questions that I have.

[End of tape]