

JANUARY 2022 SPEAKER

Bianca Marais - "Women: The Backbone of Africa"

At the time of her wedding in 2003, at 27, Bianca, then living in Johannesburg, South Africa, part of the well-to-do white minority, had an epiphany that changed the course not only of her life but also of Black women in Africa. She had been born while apartheid was still in force. She realized a Black woman named Eunice Ngogodo, a maid for her and her brother, had been "the single biggest influence in my life. She showed me how to love and also not to see the world in Black and White. She will be 99 on May 8 and I am flying to see her in June. She is the epitome of 'Women: The Backbone of Africa.'"

Bianca, an author and creative writing instructor who moved to Toronto in 2012, established and runs the Eunice Ngogodo Own Voices Initiative "to empower young Black women in Africa to write and publish their own stories" and is a very active "fundraiser to assist grandmothers in Soweto caring for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS." She is a strong advocate and supporter of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, established in 2003 expressly to help grassroots sub-Saharan organizations in Africa combat AIDS, and its affiliated Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign, started in 2006. Bianca praised UWCNY members for their help with both. "AIDS killed an entire generation. Grandmothers in their 60s, 70s, and 80s stepped into the void," she said. "Eunice lost all five of her children and two grandchildren."

"I lived in a safe white neighbourhood. I could have done nothing, but I felt I had to do something; that there was an overwhelming need," Bianca said. A 2000 speech by an eleven-year-old Black South African boy, Nkosi Johnson, terminally ill from AIDS, resonated in her mind. "Care for and accept us. We are human beings. We are all the same." She decided to do "outreach" in Johannesburg's Black Soweto slum-like district even though "I was warned that it was dangerous for white women, that I would die but as it turned out, Soweto changed my life". She'd found her cause.

She zeroed in on grandmothers. "In Africa men fish for themselves; women fish for the whole freakin' village." She took a holistic approach, starting by organizing once-a-week gatherings of grandmothers. "They needed a support system as they were ostracized because of the stigma of AIDS". She went on to push for the construction of "proper shacks" -strong material, windows, refrigerator to store anti-AIDS retroviral drugs; help young women get suitable clothing for job interviews and train them how to be interviewed; sewing machines for the grandmothers to make pyjamas from a pattern she asked a designer friend to make, bringing in money; encouraging the grandmothers to grow vegetables "to fill their empty fridges and feed their grandchildren."

She said getting Black South Africans to take AIDS retroviral drugs and anti-Covid vaccines is difficult because "They don't trust white people; they remember that white people have done harmful medical experimentation on their people."

UWCNY members were very impressed with her uplifting talk and steadfast commitment. For example: "Not only the grandmothers are amazing you are as well." "Wonderful presentation and message." "Your joy and love shone through."

Susan Goldenberg