



News

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Gandhi's granddaughter carries the family's legacy of peace in South Africa

By Maggie I. Jaruzel

Ela Gandhi learned the basics of printing a newspaper in South Africa from her politically active parents. That interest -- first sparked six decades ago -- has been rekindled and fanned into a flame.

"As a child, I was often taken to the printing place and would be put to sleep there while they worked. The newspaper came out on Friday mornings, so we worked practically the whole night on Thursdays to make sure it got out on time," said Gandhi, executive director of [Satyagraha](#), a Durban-based non-governmental organization (NGO) that publishes a monthly newspaper by the same name.

"Before I could do anything else, I was learning how to set type by hand -- the old-fashioned way -- and I was learning how to fold newspapers, so I grew up knowing every aspect of printing."

Today, at 66, she is following in the footsteps of her journalist father, Manilal Gandhi, and also those of her grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, known worldwide for his advocacy of non-violence.

Both men were writers and publishers of *Indian Opinion*, a weekly newspaper established by the elder Gandhi in South Africa in 1903 and published continuously for 60 years. Except for a short period, either father or son was at the helm of the newspaper, which was known as the voice of the Indian people in that country.

Today, like then, the nation's 1.2 million citizens who have an Indian heritage are largely concentrated in the KwaZulu-Natal province, where polarization and tensions exist between the Indian and indigenous African communities. So it is fitting that *Satyagraha*, the Ela Gandhi-published newspaper, is printed in that region to address Indo-African relations.

Before her work at Satyagraha, Ela Gandhi was elected to serve in Parliament after the nation's first fully democratic elections in 1994. She was re-elected for another term that ran through 2003. While in Parliament, she worked to improve conditions for South Africa's poor and marginalized citizens, so helping establish the NGO was a natural progression.

In addition to publishing the newspaper, the organization sponsors events that raise public awareness about violence against women, produces educational materials on non-violence for schools, and sponsors annual speech contests for students on the same topic. Since 2002, the Mott Foundation has provided three general purpose grants totaling \$171,200 to Satyagraha under the race and ethnic relations component of its South Africa grantmaking.

"Satyagraha" means "in pursuit of truth," and was coined in 1906 by Mahatma Gandhi to define his philosophy of



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non-violent resistance as a way to promote social and political reform. The strategy was first used to protest “pass laws,” which required Indians living in South Africa to be fingerprinted “like criminals” and to carry passbooks that verified their identity, Ela Gandhi said.

Pursuing and sharing life’s truths is the goal of *Satyagraha*, an all-volunteer newspaper founded in 2000. The newspaper is a vehicle to stimulate community discussions and share ideas about ways to build strong relationships between people of all races who call South Africa their home.

Instead of focusing on what is wrong with the nation or sensationalizing violent stories, the eight-page publication is full of stories that educate and inspire.

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One regular feature of the publication is “Eye on the World.” Articles in this section highlight what people around the globe are doing to strengthen their communities, such as planting community gardens to build goodwill between fellow gardeners while also providing fresh vegetables that can be sold and/or consumed by low-income families.

There are no advertisements in the publication, which is distributed free to hundreds of high school students, and also mailed to about 700 paid subscribers. In addition, the newspaper is sent to libraries throughout the country.

This year, the newspaper and other venues throughout the nation have been commemorating the 100-year anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi’s speech in Johannesburg that launched the “satyagraha” movement. Centennial events have included public screenings of the film “Making of the Mahatma,” a three-day pro-peace conference in Durban, and the opening of a permanent public exhibit on the life of the peace activist at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg.

Most people recognize Mahatma Gandhi for leading a civil rights movement in his homeland, which resulted in India gaining independence from British rule in 1947, but few know that he first spent 21 years fighting for racial equality for Indians in South Africa’s segregated society.

Ela Gandhi says that it is both an honor and a tremendous responsibility to share a surname with someone as well-respected as her grandfather, who left her with an abundance of fond memories.

In 1948, a few months after seven-year-old Ela and her family returned to South Africa from a six-month visit with Mahatma Gandhi in India, they got some shocking news -- the man they loved had been assassinated by a Hindu extremist.

But Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of obtaining equality for all people did not die with him, Ela Gandhi said.

“Legacy plays a big role in people’s lives. If you are the child of a carpenter, you will have a natural urge to do carpentry,” she said.

“I saw my father go to prison many times in the defiance campaigns. I saw both my parents going off to rallies and speaking out against injustices. In my family, there was the newspaper and there was political activity, so it is natural for me to be involved with both.”