1994 Bad Boll conference. Reflections after 31 years.

Irmgard sent me a pdf of my paper, given at Bad Boll in 1994, and that of my partner Olive. Mine was a political treatise on the development of gay friendly legislation and rights in South Africa, and Olive's was a talk on step parenting and "labels". Irmgard has asked me to prepare a discussion on how the conference affected our lives, if it did so.

This request has come at a very sad time for me. After thirty-four years together, my darling Olive has died of a disease which has plagued us for more than fifteen years, Alzheimers Dementia. It is only seven weeks since her death so, although the mourning and loss has been over a very long period, hence "the slow dying" label, I am still raw and sad beyond measure. Olive spent the last three months of her life in a frail care unit in our local town, after I was unable to care for her at home anymore, and died peacefully, in her sleep on 10 June 2025, an hour after I had fed her lunch in her room. We had a carer for three months, but she, and her lover, were murdered by her estranged husband, a sad reflection of the violence that exists South Africa.

Reading the PDF after three decades has been fascinating. Gay rights are firmly established in South Africa, the first country in Africa to do so. This does not mean that discrimination does not exist, but legally LGBTQ people are protected by law and the constitution. We were the first country in Africa to do this, and in many other countries being gay is still illegal. My work in Tanzania brought Olive travelling with me occasionally, and our relationship would certainly have been deemed as illegal there.

South Africa has not developed into the democratic paradise we all imagined. It is a country plagued by corruption and violence, thirty years of democratic elections. Nearly half of the population are on very low government grants and few black people have profited by the new dispensation, although many have become very wealthy indeed. Extreme poverty and hunger are prevalent in most regions. Public services have declined, with a dysfunctional post office service, health and education struggling to maintain acceptable standards, and roads and other infrastructure deteriorating. Confidence in the ANC government has dropped to all time lows, with a current so called "government of national unity" operating at low levels of efficiency. The ANC, which in the first election reigned supreme, have lost following in every subsequent four yearly election.

In respect to Olive's paper, I was surprised to see that she had used pseudonyms for all of our names. My children's second names were used, and I was called Pamela, and Olive used her mother's surname and not her own first name. I am uncertain why she did this, and it puzzles me greatly. We were "out" to our families, friends and communities.

Our own lives changed after Bad Boll. As a political activist, I was encouraged to start a nonprofit to investigate state violence, then went on to manage a large section of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, then on to top management with the Department of Transport, and semi-retired doing consulting in various parts of Africa on Transport and Road Safety issues. In 2012 I had to return home from Tanzania, where I had spent every second week, as Olive was no longer able to manage without me due to her dementia. I was always open about being gay, and it was certainly accepted by the many people with whom I worked and the140 people who worked for me over the years.

Olive developed IT programs and CDs to assist people, mainly children with dyslexia, to learn phonics and spelling, which was her speciality. She also formed a nonprofit to assist teachers in "previously disadvantaged" schools with phonics. She, also, did not hide her sexuality.

As a couple we have experienced unconditional love from our families. My children enjoyed Olive's firm but kind and loving role as a stepmother and are now in their forties, one is a mother of two boys herself, and the other just having completed a master's degree in urban housing. They, their partners and extended family, and the two South African grandsons fully accept and embrace our "alternative lifestyle" and we were accepted in government in Pretoria, in civil society there too, and most certainly in the little rural town of Wakkerstroom which has been our home for the past twelve years.

Olive has five grandsons, living in Nigeria, Australia and Germany, with two still in England. All have known about our relationship since birth and we have regularly spent holidays together, either in England or in South Africa over more than three decades. We are both known as Gogo (Zulu for granny) by our own grandsons, and the step grandmother by her first name.

Memories from the 1994 conference have become dim over the years. I remember the love shown to my two daughters who also attended the conference. They were allowed and encouraged to join in activities which were suitable for them. I remember the regimented warm swimming baths nearby, where we wallowed around in hot water, with snow all around us, and the little shop selling chocolate. We bought hand made Christmas tree decorations. I still eat breakfast as served at Bad Boll, oats soaked in milk with yoghurt, berries and applies. It snowed, and we all loved it. Now we live in a place where snow is experienced, unusual for South Africa.

I also remember the general disagreement of the delegates to the conference, when a small group of women expressed the opinion that it was OK to start sexual relationships with children. "Having sex with a child is preferable to them being introduced to sex by a man." There was heated debate over the issue, and the records will show the outcome which I do not remember. It was the first time I had come across this attitude in woman and Olive and I were both horrified.

There was a group of delegates from the United States who were lobbying to have women released from prison. These women had been given life sentences without parole for crimes where they played minor roles, and these sentences were considered too harsh. Some left children outside who, obviously, also suffered.

What I have not mentioned is our spiritual journey. Shortly after Bad Boll we both started to question our Christian participation. We left the church (Church of England/Anglican) that we were attending, and did not find another to replace it. We became "evangelical heathens" questioning the dogma of conventional Christianity and becoming more certain that we were non-believers. Despite that – maybe because of it, Olive's youngest daughter became a priest and is also married to a priest. This has not affected our relationship with that part of the family, and they understand and respect our opinions. Olive had no funeral service at her own request. We will, when things are less tender, have a party to celebrate her life.

Overall, only three or four years into our relationship, the conference helped to show us that our constitutional rights were not shared in many parts of the world. We were already "out" but the gathering gave us confidence to carry on our lives without fear of discrimination. I am still in almost daily touch with one of the candidates who joined us, and I watched with interest the rise to political prominence of another candidate, Prudence Mbele, who won several awards for her activism. She died in 2017 in her forties, weakened by her HIV status.

Friendships were forged, intellectual analysis was encouraged, and many famous lesbians were introduced, whose lives could be followed as social media developed in the years after the conference. My two daughters were helped to understand why they had two "mothers". The younger one, aged about 8 at the time, said to me. "I don't care who is gay or straight, who is homosexual or heterosexual. I just know that I have the happiest home life of anyone in my class." And that pretty much says it all.

Wendy Watson, born 1947

1 August 2025. Wakkerstroom, South Africa.