

Investing in Each Other

BY MAUREEN C. EWING

One of the hazards of living abroad is the distance you create when you leave new friends. You exchange one life for another, missing weddings, births and deaths. Yet, you keep a piece of your heart with each friend in every country.

In March, a wonderful woman died in a small corner of South Africa. The name Thelma Henderson won't mean anything to you, but her friendship shifted my life's direction.

When I arrived in Grahamstown, South Africa in January 1998, Thelma and her husband Derek welcomed me into their home and community. I spent many afternoons on their garden veranda drinking rooibos tea with lemon, talking politics and literature. Derek taught me to drive stick (something even my mother gave up on years ago), and Thelma kept me busy volunteering.

It came as a shock to hear Thelma died, even at the age of 75. I cannot imagine returning to South Africa without her there. Such is the case with all the loved ones we lose.

One of the joys of our friendship involved talking politics. Thelma followed U.S. politics ferociously ever since she came to the United States as a young woman during Kennedy's presidency. When I arrived in 1998, the media was full of Clinton, a blue dress and a cigar. Then came Bush. Then, Obama. Over the past two years, every time I would call, she would begin, "So, what do you think about our Obama? How's he doing?" We'd talk about foreign policy and how much the world needed an American president that didn't bully everyone, a president that listened.

Soon after Obama's win, I called and told her about my participation in the Grant Park election night rally. She soaked up every word.



I wonder if it made her think back to South Africa's 1994 election. She was, after all, invited to one of Nelson Mandela's birthday parties and later earned the Order of the Baobab in Bronze. The day before she died, I realized I hadn't yet sent her an Obama "Yes We Did" sticker. I knew she would love it, and would display it with pride. I didn't know she was dying.

Of course, we didn't always talk American politics. South African politics came up with even more fervor. In 1998, South Africa pulsed with new hope under Mandela's leadership. Over the course of our friendship, I listened to her talk about the changes in her country, and the hope she still held for its promise. I know she would've watched the recent South

African election with great concern. How long would it take for people to demand ethical leaders, to break party loyalties? Just as I waited for America's leadership to show intelligence and compassion, so did she.

Thelma spent the latter part of her life working as a tireless fundraiser for schools, organizations and senior citizens. She was more than a woman who could get people to write checks. She wanted to build up her community, to give people access to education, and to give them hope for their futures and those of their loved ones.

How lucky we are to meet these people in the course of our lives, to witness how much can be done in one life. Thelma didn't sit around and watch TV (though she watched tennis with abandon). She worked and worked and worked without salary, without expectation. She *did*. She demanded the most out of everyone she knew because there was too much work to be done.

As our economy continues on its roller coaster, as stories of lost jobs and retirement funds continue, let us not forget that the more invested we are in each other, the stronger our country and our planet will become. Let us be mindful to preserve and protect the land that sustains us, the people who love us, the hope that keeps us looking for answers.

As I mourn the loss of a friend, I cannot help but be awed by the legacy she left behind. I only wish President Obama could have met her. 🏠

Maureen C. Ewing is a recent graduate of Columbia College Chicago's MFA-Creative Writing Poetry program. She also teaches First Year Writing at Columbia and works as a freelance writer.