

Remembering and Honouring Julia Nicol

Julia Nicol passed away on 3 April 2019 after many years of struggling with her health. GALA wishes to honour the legacy that Nicol left behind, particularly in the collections she donated to GALA in the 1990s, which reflect and document her significant contribution to queer rights in South Africa. Nicol donated two collections to GALA, the Julia Nicol Collection and the LAGO/OLGA Collection.

Julia Nicol

A librarian by training, Julia Nicol was an active member of the Cape Town-based organisations, GASA-6010, Lilacs, Gender, LAGO and OLGA. She was also the co-author of an article, "The Lavender Lobby", published in *Defiant Desire* (1994). Nicol continued to play a role in gay and lesbian politics in the Western Cape, although ongoing health problems meant that this was largely behind the scenes.

The bulk of Nicol's personal collection consists of photographs documenting the activities of the gay and lesbian organisations that Julia Nicol was involved with in Cape Town from 1985 to 1991. The photographs were meticulously annotated by Nicol. The collection further includes miscellaneous documents, such as speeches, flyers and pamphlets, as well as answers from Julia Nicol to interview questions from GALA contained in handwritten correspondence and 1 email, 1999-2004. An edited version of this 'interview' was published in *Sex & Politics in South Africa* in 2005.



L-R: Simon Nkoli, Ivan Toms, Sheila Lapinsky and Julia Nicol. Cape Town, January, 1989. Julia Nicol Collection.

LAGO/OLGA

Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO) was formed in Cape Town in 1986 following the failure of GASA-6010, the Western Cape arm of the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA), to accommodate activists who wanted to go in a more radical, political direction. LAGO's membership ranged from about 5 to 12 people, and was largely composed of prominent, well known gay and lesbian activists who were active in the anti-apartheid struggle, such as Ivan

Toms, Julia Nicol and Sheila Lapinsky. The organisation also made important links with

supportive overseas lesbian and gay organisations. Internal dissent led to the dissolution of the organisation in October 1987, as LAGO's constitution required full consensus for all decisions, a provision which proved to be unworkable.

The majority of LAGO's membership reorganised themselves as the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists, OLGA (the name would change to Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Action in 1992). OLGA had identical aims and objectives to that of LAGO, but its constitution did not require full consensus. OLGA joined the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1990 and in September 1991 submitted a proposal to the ANC Constitutional Committee for the inclusion in its draft constitution of provisions outlawing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. These provisions were included in the committee's draft constitution published in October 1991 and were ratified by the ANC in May 1992. In consultation with other lesbian and gay organisations in South Africa, OLGA drafted a "Charter of Bisexual, Lesbian and Gay Rights" in 1993. OLGA was dissolved in 1994, the same year that South Africa held its first democratic elections.



OLGA welcomes Nelson Mandela upon his release from prison, Cape Town, 1990 – (Photograph from the Julia Nicol Collection – AM 2846. centre: Sheila Lapinsky and Ivan Toms)

“We felt it was essential for a specifically gay/lesbian voice to be speaking out against apartheid. The Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) has emphatically failed to do this, and nor was it being done by any of the smaller organisations at the time. We felt that to do so was vital for both the sake of our self-esteem as lesbian/gay individuals, and for the sake of the image of the gay community in the eyes of the anti-apartheid movement.”

– Julia Nicol, one of the founding members of LAGO, *Sex & Politics* interview

The bulk of the LAGO/OLGA archive collection consists of the organisational records, policy papers, correspondence, newsletters, pamphlets and flyers of LAGO and OLGA. There is also material related to Ivan Toms and other gay and lesbian organisations. The collection's donor, Julia Nicol, dedicated this collection to 'the isolated lesbian and gay youth of South Africa'. Other GALA collections that contain LAGO/OLGA material include those of Julia Nicol, Sheila Lapinsky, Ivan Toms, Peter Tatchell and Derrick Fine.

Remembering Julia Nicol

"I am so so sad to hear fo Julia's death. I met her only once - I think it was in Cape Town, at the historic first Cape Town LGBTI Pride March, in 1992. But we had corresponded by handwritten letter before and again long after that. She seemed to prefer reclusion, but that made her human and political engagements the more intense, the more poignant and the more precious. She was a savvy, insightful and redoubtable part of the Cape Town LGBTI groups whose far-sighted strategies played so crucial a role in securing the inclusion of sexual orientation in our Constitution. Amidst the not infrequent fracturing of those groups, Julia was a solacing and constant presence. I mourn her truly and most truly honour her person and her human suffering and her contribution and courage."

- Justice Edwin Cameron – GALA Patron

"Many who celebrate the advanced legal recognition that LGBTI people 'enjoy' in this country will not know Julia Nicol. This history is available, all over, but there is so much still to be written from way back then. There are many people who have not been adequately recognised, nor celebrated (enough) and Julia is one such activist. I can only recall in the days of the NCGLE when we did honour Jules, and not sure if any other institution did after."

When we look back at the apartheid struggles and the activism of lesbians and gays, Julia stands out among the few who were open then within the movement. With her life partner, comrade Sheila Barseel, and others, they formed the Organisation of Lesbians and Gays (OLGA) that was the first such to be part of the mass democratic movement and UDF. Abigale and Glow would follow. These organisations and comrades were instrumental in positioning the rights of LGBT people to ensure recognition within the liberation movement, especially the ANC. Julia played a critical role throughout, including challenging the racist GASA when it distanced itself against the activism of Simon Nkoli.

A few minutes ago I learnt from Sheila that Julia passed away last week. I am very saddened by this. Julia lived mostly away from the public for years because of her health. She was an incredible resource for many years for sharing crucial information on strategies to help us advance struggles. Always warm and gentle, encouraging and enquiring, I have missed that during the busy times I have been juggling.

She joins so many others of this generation, who paved an important path. For us left, a huge task is to continue to ensure that their contributions are not forgotten. Like the eagle on your cover comrade Julia, fly well dear. And thank you for the many gifts you leave us with.

Lala ngokuthula dearest comrade sister Julia Nicol!"

- Phumi Mtetwa, friend and activist, Facebook tribute.