

HISTORY

# Anti-apartheid activist bares soul in her book

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ALISON Jessica Weihe had never heard of Rosa Parks when she refused to get on a “whites only” bus in apartheid South Africa, choosing instead to travel in a bus reserved for people of colour in protest against the segregation laws. Back in the US, Parks, a black woman widely regarded as the “mother of the civil rights movement”, had refused to give up her bus seat for a white man, as was expected.

Weihe says it became “normal” for her to take that bus, and so when she became an activist, it was just an “extension” of who she had become.

“Because in my heart something had shifted,” she says.

Growing up in a fairly posh area in the Cape, she was an unassuming white girl from an ordinary background who tried to be invisible, not believing that she was worthy of anything and never fully belonging anywhere.

But life had other plans for her and before she realised what was happening, Weihe was knee-deep in the anti-apartheid Struggle, working around the clock with her comrades in the trade unions, printing posters and organising meetings as they fought for liberation.

In a sense, she didn’t choose the Struggle; the Struggle chose her.

“I slipped into the movement without fanfare, I just became a comrade in the most natural place in the world,” she says.

It was in the trenches of the resistance movement that she finally felt whole, that she found her tribe.

While everyone has a story to tell, Weihe didn’t think hers mattered until she was persuaded to share her experiences and so her book was born.



ALISON Jessica Weihe reunites with friends and comrades at the launch of her book, *Belonging: Finding Tribes of Meaning*. | Supplied.

That book, *Belonging: Finding Tribes of Meaning* recently hit the shelves. It has drawn much interest, even from abroad.

President Cyril Ramaphosa also has a copy, which was hand-delivered to him. Her book to Ramaphosa contains a message saying: “Thank you for believing in me and thank you for giving me a second chance,” said Weihe.

“I cannot believe how the story

that I almost never wrote seems to have captivated people. It’s surreal, that’s all I can tell you,” Weihe told the *Sunday Tribune*.

The writing process proved to be cathartic and helped her realise where her political awakening began. It wasn’t as a student, but much earlier when she accompanied her dad to places like orphanages in Athlone “on the other side of the railway tracks” and a concentration camp in Dakar.

Then she attended an Anglican Student’s Conference addressed by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, further cementing her awakening.

However, while she might have found her “tribe”, her feeling of belonging turned to shame.

During one of their court battles the activists asked Weihe to represent them. Everything hinged on her testimony but the information she needed went missing and she didn’t have the

heart to tell her comrades. Political heavyweights like Alec Erwin, were all there, watching.

“I was annihilated on that courtroom floor, I was shredded. The very pale girl who they thought would be the saviour of their court case, who would present them with academic brilliance, shamed them.”

Shattered, Weihe was suicidal for a long time, often driving along Chapman’s Peak, a mountain pass above the ocean, wanting to end it all. She fled to Johannesburg to hide and became an award-winning entrepreneur.

“I didn’t think it was forgivable.” After years of hiding, she has finally met her comrades again this year.

“My Samwu family, became the family that I had never, ever felt. I had never, ever felt like I belonged in my own family. That’s why my book is called *Belonging*, for that reason. And so they let me into their family, and I let them down. And that was the greatest shame of my life, and that’s why it took 30 years to have the courage to tell my story.

“The reason why I can face them today is because I’m facing them with my story of how much they shaped my life,” she says.

Her story is also one of forgiveness and new beginnings. It also contains never-before-revealed moments like the time when Weihe’s car was bombed because they thought it belonged to Barbara Hogan.

After finishing the book, she realised that it wasn’t truthful enough and then she rewrote it because she wanted to bare her soul to “write naked”.

*Belonging: Finding Tribes of Meaning*, is available at Exclusive Books and all good bookshops. It retails for R310 and is a tear-jerker with lots of heart and history.