Being a voice for the Brugspruit Wetland

Social and Environmental Justice in Action / Action Voices

By Collen Jolobe, Lorraine Kakaza, and Susan Moraba



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Being a Voice for the Brugspruit Wetland A case study developed through the *Changing Practice: Olifants* project.

July 2018

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGM: Annual General Meeting

AWARD: Association for Water and Rural Development

CBO: Community-Based Organisation
CER: Centre for Environmental Rights

DWS: Department of Water and Sanitation

EMG: Environmental Monitoring Group

IDP: Integrated Development Plan

KG-Mall: Kwa-Guqa Mall

MPWC: Mpumalanga Water Caucus

NEMA: National Environmental Management Act

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

SAWC: South African Water Caucus

UNISA: University of South Africa



Introduction

Being activists

To be an activist is the choice of an individual. You need to be willing to take a stand for the community and to act against business corporations and anybody else who violates the basic rights of a community. Activists are not chosen or appointed, an activist does not have a certificate or qualification. An activist is simply an individual who stands up for the community against all forms of oppression. An activist can be a member of the community that experiences problems, she/he can also be a professional from an NGO or a university who takes a stand for a community. It can be an old person, a young woman or a man. Individuals who stand up to act for communities regardless of age, race, gender or class are activists. So, we are activists and activism demands sacrifices. Few activists are employed; most activists volunteer their time. We must always be confident and passionate about our work to make an example of the struggles we are going through to succeed. We are the brave and concerned individuals who step up and voice the feelings of the community; we analyse the problems, expose the causes and the perpetrators, help formulate community demands and mobilise the communities to take collective action. That's us at Action Voices (now called Social and Environmental Justice in Action).

"We are the brave and concerned individuals who step up and voice the feelings of the community"

Who are we, and why are we driven to be activists?

Collen Jolobe

I'm Collen Jolobe and I reside at Zone 14, eMalahleni, where I grew up. I was raised by a single parent, and I'm the youngest of two children. My location is next to Emsagweni township. I became an activist when I was at Love Life Community Centre as a volunteer. I was doing cleaning campaigns at schools and in my community and helping at an orphanage by planting trees and watering the gardens. I met a friend who was the founder of the



organisation Mpumalanga Youth Against Climate Change, who introduced me to the struggle. It's there that became an environmental activist. What I like about the work I do as an activist is that I can work with the community and that I can help them to solve the problems they are facing concerning the environment. My interest in the project was raised when I did a lot of research for an

article I wrote about wetlands for the Monitoring School by BenchMarks Foundation. The community of Vosman never had the knowledge about the wetlands/stream because they didn't care about them. They dumped plastic bags, animal skulls, nappies and all sorts of rubbish you can think of, and by doing that they showed they didn't know how important the wetland is in their lives. Even our municipality didn't care to protect the wetland. The community of Emsagweni needs to be aware of the importance of the wetland. It will serve the community with water and can be used for spiritual and traditional practices. As a child on my way home from school I used to pass Emsagweni where the wetland/stream is situated and I used to play with my friends there. Where the school was, is now the KG Mall. I am so familiar with the wetland, and now it has been contaminated with Acid Mine Drainage from industry and the sewerage from the KG Mall. The community of Emsagweni still dumps waste next to the wetland. That means that the wetland needs to be protected and conserved.

The challenge with my work is that it requires me to work with people. Some people are difficult, mostly when I go to the community but that doesn't stop me from trying to bring the change I want to see in my community.

Lorraine Kakaza

I am Lorraine Kakaza, I've been an activist since 2014 because I saw things that were not going right. My community faces many problems. The main problem is water pollution and what was on my mind was that 'Water is life' and you can't survive without it. I stood up and had to bring change. It wasn't easy at all to win people's or the community's trust. I knew it was going to take time. I knew this was going to make me an enemy, but I carried on because I wanted to achieve the goal I set for my community. In the past people in the community were angry about our situation. There was a lot of conflict among groups in the community and it was hard for activists as many received threats. The local government thought I was fighting

with them. I used to fear for my life but the trainings I have undergone built me up and made me strong and fearless. I can pinpoint grassroots problems, think about strategies, map, write, research and analyse.

I started by mobilising people: at street meetings, people became more aware that the local government would not buy bottled water for their big meetings if the water in our area was clean. They became aware of what it means when our water has a colour or when a community has rashes on their private parts. People started to realise that what I was telling them about our water being polluted was true. I started to put more effort into what I was doing as an activist. I got support from BenchMarks Foundation. They guided me, and I was not in a good financial standing, but they took my writing and printed newsletters, blogged it and shared it with communities on the internet. They gave me hope; I was able to tell people to read. I did not know I would be so passionate about writing about the realities of my township. It was a big opportunity when BenchMarks Foundation came to my community to help me make a podcast to make my community's struggle well-known. I would not be known across the country if I was not telling my stories, motivating other people, giving them hope that things will change.

I get motivated by Susan Moraba as a facilitator because she comes from the community. I see progress in my life and I believe that people won't give up on me. I now have writing and research skills. I used to think of getting a job, but now I have this dream that one day I will be a journalist who will be writing about big things. I know it can take me years, but at the end of the day I will change many people's lives. I continue to write. I will continue to implement my knowledge. I continue being an activist because I have seen change.

It has not been easy. But now, my relationship with the community is stronger than ever before. I am now respected; people read my reality stories and that keeps me going. The issue of water has not changed much but our community resistance has come a long way with court cases and the help of the Legal Resources Centre, Centre for Environmental Rights and community testimonies.

"It has not been easy. But now, my relationship with the community is stronger than ever before"

Susan Moraba

My name is Susan Moraba and I was born in Burgersfort, Limpopo Province. In the late 1980's, my family moved to Mpumalanga, to eMalahleni, Zone 14 next to Emsagweni where I started my schooling. My primary school was Thembani Combined School which was at Vosman area because it was the only school. That is where Kwa-Guqa Mall was built; the school building was said to be a shopping complex which was abandoned because it was haunted.

I used to cross the wetland/stream with my schoolmates when going to school during 1990; the water was clean, flowing all the time, I could see the sand, the stones as well as frogs and small insects in the water. When crossing the water, there were big stones lined up and we struggled during rainy days as the water would be too high to cross. We had to go along the busy road, which was not safe as there were many accidents. School kids would be knocked down by cars until we were moved in groups to a newly built school at Zone 14 the following year.

I got involved in activism in 2013 with the non-profit organisation called Mpumalanga Youth Against Climate Change and in 2014 became involved with the BenchMarks Foundation Community Monitoring School, known as Action Voices, as a facilitator for the Mpumalanga monitors group. I trained monitors from different organisations and areas in writing skills. I also acquired a wide range of experience within the monitoring school as well as internationally through exchange programmes, such as social audits, crowd mapping, radio podcasts and video script writing.

In 2017, I participated in the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) 'Right & Remedies School for Activists' facilitated by CER Lawyers. I also participated in the short course Journalism for Beginners with UNISA, supported by BenchMarks Foundation and in 2017-2018 in the social learning Changing Practice Course facilitated by Rhodes University, supported by the



Susan, Lorraine, Collen and baby Tapelo working on an assignment

Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG) and AWARD.

I enjoy what I'm doing as an activist, especially training other activists and members of my community on the impacts of climate change. Working to bring about change is very joyful to me because I am also learning from others and from the work I do as an activist. The difficult part of activism, whereby I always think twice

before acting, is when I must take on a certain company, government or others knowing that there's a political influence within. There I always think, strategize and work with a team; in that way I prevent being marked and intimidated.

All three of us, Collen Jolobe, Lorraine Kakaza and Susan Moraba, were participants on the Changing Practice Course. We all wrote this case, after which we met, read through each other's work and combined the work into this case study.



Background

The situation

As mentioned in our personal introductions, the main problem and reason we've become activists in our communities, is the pollution of the wetlands/streams that are located right next to our villages: the Klein Olifants stream, Brugspruit stream and wetland. The pollution has got worse over time, not only are community members still dumping their waste, there is now also the pollution from the KG Mall and from the nearby mine. The stream and wetland are under threat and therefore our communities are under threat. The stream and wetland are being suffocated by all the waste thrown in; it looks bad, it smells bad and people and animals are affected by it as they get rashes, cannot drink the water anymore and cannot use it for traditional practices. The community needs to understand the problem and then take action, together with the councillor, the municipality and the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) - who are currently not doing much





The Brugspruit as it meanders through the community

Our Organisations

When we started the Changing Practice course in May 2017, we established our organisation called Social and Environmental Justice in Action. In October 2017 we registered as an NPO. We are fully independent as we have gained enough knowledge and skills to train others, do research and write our own reports. In Social and Environmental Justice in Action we deal with social issues that are the cause of poverty and inequality. We focus on gender and environmental issues regarding climate change and global warming.

Mpumalanga Community Monitors is a monitoring project under the Action Voices project of BenchMarks Foundation. Mpumalanga Monitors is a group of volunteers based in the Highveld region. Our purpose is to enhance our roles as activists in organising and mobilising to build the power of the communities to act to improve their lives. Our work enables us to bring together NGOs and CBOs to commit to and build community power. Reflecting on our experiences, we can say that there is a power within oppressed communities and there is a need to build on this power of the communities to control their land, their resources and their lives. An important context of our struggle is that we have limited resources to do this important

work but we will soldier on.

Our Change Project

We are based in the Upper Olifants Catchment and this Change Project is conducted in the Vosman, eMalahleni area. This is in the Nkangala district, Highveld region in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Vosman is а semi-informal settlement surrounded by the Klein Olifants stream with the wetland and Brugspruit stream. It is also next to the N4 national road and importantly next to the Transvaal & Delagoa Bay Mine which is now being remined by small-scale mining.

Our Change Project aims to address the pollution of the wetland/stream at Vosman,



Map of our study area

as this is dirty with waste material, animal skulls, and sewerage. The sewerage flows from the residents' houses/yards, from the main drainage pipes on the streets and from the KG Mall's pipes which are above the wetland. We are focusing on the area of the wetland that is between

Vosman location, Ext. 3 and 5 and Emsagweni location, because this is a wetland area that urgently needs to be protected from the daily pollution.

The project that we are working on as a group fits into the theme *Rivers, Wetlands & Spiritual Water Users*, which is one of the focus areas of the Olifants Civil Society Network and the South African Water Caucus (SAWC). Our particular focus is on preserving our water sources for future use and keeping water resources clean, protected and maintained because we believe that 'Water is Life'. We need to change the way our municipality thinks about wetland pollution and the way our people do things: we need to change mindsets and actions.



What is happening

What we are seeing

We see the Brugspruit river flowing into the wetland and stream, which joins the Olifants river and other segmented small tributaries and dams. The flow of the stream/wetland is narrow and has changed direction of flow due to rain and other natural degraders such as soil erosion,

which is caused by heavy rains, climate change, and drought. The reeds in the wetland have also grown in a massive way.

The waste that we have observed in the water is plastic bags, bottles, dead animals, disposable nappies and other raw material. All this waste is found in the wetland/stream. There are three-hole tanks



Waste next to the Brugspruit River

(where the water flows through) under the two road bridges. However, the water is now only flowing through a small path in one hole as the other two holes are full of soil, stones, and waste. On the sides, there is green grass and many reeds which makes the wetland look green even though it is dirty. The smell around the flowing wetland/stream is very bad and toxic as the sewer water contains sulphur dioxide (as an experienced activist who is familiar with wetlands explained during our first joint visit to the area).

We are facing droughts while mines and power stations are making billions because mines always mine next to wetlands to discharge the wastewater into the wetland. An example in Vosman area is the Transvaal Delagoa Bay abandoned mine, which has purification ponds that discharge underground mine water with Acid Mine Drainage into the wetland. This is a huge problem. The water is so contaminated that it is no longer used for rituals, baptisms and other purposes by the nearby communities.

What we are hearing

On the 27th of June 2018, the Action Voices team went to the nearby communities at Emsagweni where we interviewed the community with regard to the situation they live in as well as the wetland/stream and the impacts of pollution. We wanted to know: how long they have been living in the area; if they understand the importance of a wetland; how they feel when it's so dirty and what needs to be done in order to keep it clean. We identified a few people that we wanted to interview during the house-to-house visits, which include community members, the ward committee members, youth in the area as well as traditional healers.

During our area visit and interviews, the community members emphasized that the wetlands need to be fenced and that the municipality should collect waste to stop people from throwing waste into the wetland. The municipality is not collecting waste in this section, saying there are no proper streets and the place is muddy. That is why they call the section 'wag' (meaning 'wait') area, as the people there are to be moved to a better place which they have been waiting for since a long time. The municipality said it would move families from the area, but they only move 5 families each time they allocate RDP houses. Another problem that we heard from one of the community members is that whenever they move certain families, another family or person occupies the area which results in many community members in an unsafe section. He also indicated that this is shown by the stand numbers on their walls as there are many numbers, more than 3 in some houses.

Our sense was that the community doesn't care anymore about keeping the stream/wetland clean, because they also dump waste next to the wetland. The municipality is also not helping or doing anything about the wetland/stream. The municipality and the KG Mall are discharging their waste into the wetland and currently the septic tank from KG Mall is non-functional as the sewer water and waste material is spilling out of the storm drainage into the wetland/stream. The sewer problems from the municipality, as the community alludes to, has been happening for plus minus ten years and the KG Mall problem for plus minus five years.

We realise the injustices that our municipality is posing on the communities, as the areas were established many years ago and still there is no change for the better. After conducting the door-to-door and the awareness campaigns and two meetings, the people started to see the

wetland as important, hence the need to keep it clean to help them with fresh, clean water when there is no water.



Disposable nappies and other rubbish close to the wetland



What the law says

This situation of pollution could arise, because the community is not aware of the legislation: the National Water Act and the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) of 1998 that talk about water quality and wetland monitoring. They should be aware of it, as water is life and they have a right to be provided with clean and safe natural water preservations, protecting wetlands. Only if they know the legislation, they can stand up for their rights.

We checked the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) on what it says. We also checked the constitution combined with NEMA and the National Water Act. In the municipal IDP there is nothing about wetlands or any projects regarding wetlands. The Constitution stipulates that 'everyone has the right to a clean and healthy environment' – and government needs to take care of that. This is clearly not happening as people are living in an environment that is very dirty. The lower part of the area, which is steep, is not taken care of by the municipality and there are no services rendered, such as providing the community with tap water, electricity, infrastructure, sanitation and waste removal services. People connect water and electricity illegally from the other serviced section. They have done this for many years now.

We believe that everyone has the right to a safe home and to be provided with services rendered to all equally. We feel the unfairness that after so many years of democracy we still see people suffering, because the municipality is not adhering to the law. The wetland policies under Water Quality in Rivers, Wetlands, Dams, as stated in the Water Services Act 108 of 1997 under Section 84, and other water legislation or water act/policies on water use licenses clearly state that the municipality should be taking care of the water needs of the community. We know they have a responsibility to care for them.



Sewage spill at Vosman

5.

The change we work towards

Our vision

We want to see the wetland and stream being clean, with all the holes of the bridge functioning, so that water can flow through them in a straight path. We want to see the water being preserved for human use and be monitored all the time. We also want to see the National Water Act and NEMA of 1998 being implemented. The community should be aware of it, as they have a right to be provided with clean and safe natural water preservations under the laws, but they have to be followed and exercised.

Our work towards change

Our work saw many different activities. As described above, we started with our own Toxic Tour around the areas to observe, to get to know the issues, map the areas and understand the change we wanted to see.



Documenting the Toxic Tour

The next step was to contact the municipality. We talked to the ward councillor of the area as we know her. It was easy to communicate with her as she is approachable. We met her on her way to the municipal office and talked to her about the Changing Practice course we are participating in. She agreed to support us in our Change Project, saying she is happy that young people are taking education seriously. Educational support is also important as whatever we do as students and pupils is also benefiting our communities. We wanted her to negotiate with her superiors in supporting the Change Project by cleaning the wetland and providing machines like front-end loaders or graders to remove the dirt, soil and open the wetland to be visible and flow nicely. The challenge with getting her support is that she must get permission from her superiors to allocate her a project to link to what we are doing. Our follow-up meeting with her is overdue because she has not managed to do this. We are thinking of submitting a proposal with a plan describing our Change Project and the support we want from the municipality, indicating how this project will benefit not only the community but the municipality in preserving wetland water and keeping it clean.

Encouraged by our ward councillor, we decided to build capacity with community members, residing next to the wetland. We held a meeting during October 2017 teaching the community members about the environment and the importance of wetlands, waste management and the impacts of waste in the wetland and water pollution. What was achieved in the meeting is that people did understand the importance of waste management and how pollution impacts on the wetland and destroys it.

Throughout our research and investigations, we engaged with Mpumalanga Water Caucus (MPWC) during their Annual General Meeting (AGM). In March 2016 our task was to identify

a river, stream, dam and wetland for a cleaning campaign. As Action Voices we adopted the Vosman Wetland and Brugspruit Stream as our project in eMalahleni. We engaged with the Mpumalanga Water Caucus in a cleaning campaign in Middelburg and planned to have one in eMalahleni, but due to rain we ended up cleaning the wetland by collaborating with other activists. During the 'Adopt a wetland' campaign in March 2016 we picked up waste as a sign of no dumping.

During 2016/2017 we met with the local municipal acting director in the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) about the sewerage flowing from Vosman and Emsagweni. He said that his office doesn't have enough resources to take care of all the sewer problems as they only have one vehicle. This is not only a problem for them, but the Mayor also knows the issues. He further indicated that they have regulations that allow them to discharge sewer water into the wetland and that we shouldn't be worrying about being affected from the upper stream as the people who need to be worried about being affected by the sewerage are the down-stream people.



A community workshop on the impacts of waste in the wetland

Our main duty now is to continue to demand implementation of the water laws under section 21F, that talk about them having the license to discharge waste into the wetland, as well as section G of disposing waste from the KG mall. These laws are stated in the Water Services Act of 1998 and the National Water Act of 1998.



Lorraine facilitating a community workshop

Investigating what the problem is by drawing on new knowledge

As we were working on our Change Project we realised that we did not have enough knowledge ourselves. We didn't know what a clean wetland should look like and when to recognise a wetland that is under stress. We decided to investigate this by exploring other forms of knowledge held by institutions, people, written documents and media. We learnt more about wetlands from this investigation.

Wetlands are nature's way of cleaning water as well as damming water (they hold back water in summer and release it in winter). If wetlands are destroyed so are the habitats of many birds and fish. Wetlands are natural filters capable of storing and degrading many pollutants, such as phosphorus and heavy metals, which destroy natural dams and causes flooding further downstream.

The Vosman wetland is a marsh, which has soft stemmed reeds and grass that are found at the edge of streams like the Brugspruit. Different types of reeds grow in a clean wetland. A wetland attracts water species when healthy and is always full of life as many habitats are found there. It serves as a water source. There are also different types of plants that grow in a wetland/stream that keep them green, clean and healthy. A damaged wetland has no life in it and no good insects; there is nothing living in it. The reeds no longer function properly as they no longer clean the water which is contaminated with all kinds of dirt. Wetlands need to be secured and possibly rehabilitated by monitoring. We need to promote the sustainability of wetlands through awareness campaigns educating people about the importance of wetlands and how to take care of them.

We spoke to Derick Du Toit from AWARD who gave us more questions to think about, such as: what is it that we need to change? What kind of information do we need? He was the one suggesting that we read legislation related to our Change Project, such as NEMA and the National Water Act. As mentioned above, we did research on what they say about water quality and which government departments are responsible for these areas. We understood that wetlands are protected water sources that need to be taken care of.

We also gained knowledge from media on YouTube, such as a video on 'Benefits of Wetlands' published on 12 December 2012 by Oklahoma gardening Host OSU Consumer Horticulturalist Tim Toscana and Dr Jason Vogel, Associate Professor of Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering, who spoke about the cycles of wetlands, what wetlands provide and other issues that they contribute to.



Cleaning of the Mhluzi wetland



Mine in the background and the Klein Olifants Stream/Wetland

6.

Reflecting on our work

Broader issues

Of broader influence on our Change Project are bigger issues such as climate change, water and air pollution and social issues such as overpopulation, unemployment, poverty and inequality in our mining communities. We need to learn more about this. It is everyone's duty to slow climate change down and find out how we can stop it. Social movements talk more about the root causes of climate change, such as mining of different minerals eg: coal, platinum, chrome, sand etc.

In the time of climate change, wetlands will be of importance as a source of water, as it stores water and the reeds work as a purifier in cleaning the dirt from the water. But right now, it is being polluted. Our Change Project will help us to clean the wetland, so that the community can use it and it will enhance the struggle on water issues. There is a need to work together as a collective with researchers and academics for better results. We need to look at history as well as involve the spiritual workers as they are also familiar with wetlands and the use of the sacred trees growing in the wetlands. Working together with academics and researchers helps to identify the main causes and solutions of pollution. Laboratory test results are evidence and it is useful to get to know and understand what chemicals are found in the contaminated water of a dirty wetland.

Inequality

When it comes to the issue of wetlands/streams, women are the ones facing the difficulty and the burden of not being able to use the water from the wetlands/streams, as men always say they are the breadwinners and women need to be taking care of the family needs and wants. Our culture is suppressing women, as it says women's position is in the kitchen, that's where they belong. Women are not able to voice their opinions and even at parliament it is the men who believe that they have powers. There is no collaboration when it comes to gender and inequality. This is a big issue that leads to poverty in small communities, cities and the world. The women need to come together to find a solution.

Social movement and networks

Our main objective is to make sure that we create awareness and bring everyone on board by organising, mobilising and networking through social media platforms, so the whole world is aware of the issues and a social movement is started. Cleaning of the wetland is not easy because community members are used to dumping their waste there, as they say there is no municipal waste removal service in their section. What we need to do is to change the way the communities think and do things by educating them about the importance of wetlands as the Change Project describes. During our activist's meetings with other networks, wetlands are not talked about much, but as Social and Environmental Justice in Action we feel the importance of wetlands. We are getting support from networks we work with in terms of ideas on how we should engage communities, local government and other institutions that work with wetlands - and not forgetting cleaning the wetland by picking up the waste.

"Cleaning of the wetland is not easy because community members are used to dumping their waste there, as they say there is no municipal waste removal service"

Looking back

Reflecting on what we have learnt, especially on the challenges going through the exercise, we realised that we were able to find and understand the information from other sources. We had to master the skill of writing short explanations. What was useful for us in this exercise, was working alone and finding information on our own and understanding the work even better. The advice we can give to others looking for information is for them to be patient, to persevere and to dedicate themselves towards what they are doing. They should also have faith as finding information is not as easy as we thought and sometimes we didn't get what we wanted as things also don't always work our way especially if we are doing research.



Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a lot that we need to do. We need to start to teach civil society organisations and communities about climate change, and that wetlands are very important. We need to start campaigning about preserving water through wetlands as they are the most important natural source of water. We also need to learn about how to take care of wetlands

by clearing waste, removing unwanted plants and monitoring the water quality. We need to make sure it's not contaminated by any mine, industrial chemicals or sewerage spilling from the municipal sewerage drain pipes.

We need to hold the government accountable and make all the multinational companies and the small enterprise mine businesses pay back by exercising the Water Act rights. We can do this by launching a grievance against the companies that pollute the wetland/stream, the municipal sewerage, Department of Water and Sanitation. We need to start negotiating for a solution and for support in cleaning the wetland and keeping it clean to benefit the surrounding communities. A healthy and clean wetland will also benefit the municipality of eMalahleni and the shopping mall customers, and will take away the bad smell coming from the wetland. We realise that as communities we need to come together to make our voices heard and resist. That is why as Action Voices, Culisa, Vejma- Vukani Environmental Justice Movement Alliance and other organisations we are now trying to strengthen civil society knowledge on how best we can facilitate the creation of a regional network to advocate for greater transparency and accountability in the extractive industries. We need to start taking responsibility to make our environment user-friendly to all, including biodiverse life and the insects within the wetlands.

We would like to acknowledge Award and USAID who made this work possible. We would also like to extend our deepest thanks to the Environmental Monitoring Group, Environmental Learning Research Centre: Rhodes University for building community voices. Communities are told that they can address their problems through laws and regulations. They are told that they are stakeholders and through social dialogue they can solve problems. The real-life experiences of communities is not simple. And experience shows that within government they try to prevent change at all costs. Why? Because they know what we demand as activists will reduce their profit and their power.

Sometimes by chance we bring change. It was a long journey and it continues and it is our legacy.

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