

AMY BIEHL'S LAST HOME

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## *Introduction*

OF THE approximately 18,000 people killed in South Africa's political violence during the last decade of apartheid (1984–94), a handful of victims received disproportionate publicity. One was Amy Biehl, a 26-year-old American Fulbright scholar based in Cape Town in 1992–93 who was studying the role of women in South Africa's transition to democracy. Biehl's commitment to democracy and women's rights was widely hailed by South Africans of all races who worked with her during her 10-month stay in South Africa. On August 25, 1993, two days before her scheduled return to the United States, Biehl was attacked and killed by a group of militant black youths chanting antiwhite slogans as she was giving some black friends a ride home. She was the only American killed in the political violence that accompanied apartheid's demise.

Biehl's death made headlines all over the world. So did the magnanimity of her parents, who established a foundation in Amy's name to conduct humanitarian work in Cape Town's black townships. Not only did Peter and Linda Biehl accept amnesty for their daughter's killers, but they eventually reconciled with two of the young men and hired them to work for the Amy Biehl Foundation. Today there is a monument in Gugulethu marking the spot where their daughter Amy was killed. Years before this monument was unveiled, Gugulethu residents put up a simple banner memorializing the fallen American with the words "Amy Biehl's Last Home."

Few Americans—apart from political leaders and entertainers—penetrated South Africans' consciousness as much as the Biehls did in the 1990s. Amy captured people's attention because of the supreme irony of her death. She had worked closely with black South Africans and supported the transition to majority rule, but she was killed by a group of young blacks who regarded her as a "settler" because of her white skin. After her death, Amy was widely regarded as one of the many foot soldiers in South Africa's struggle for democracy and human rights. In the years that followed, her parents became icons of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Amy Biehl and her parents personified South Africa's hopes and fears during the transition from apartheid to democracy. Amy's death sparked an unprecedented wave of national soul-searching about whether racial hatred in South Africa had escalated beyond the point of no return, just as the country was advancing toward democracy. Her parents' generosity of spirit symbolized South Africa's greatest hopes as democracy dawned—that South Africans of all races could emerge from apartheid, forgive each other, and move forward toward a better future. The reality, of course, was never this simple.

In August 1993, I was a graduate student at Stanford, Amy's alma mater, writing my dissertation on South African history. Two days after Amy was killed, I saw her photo in the *San Jose Mercury News* and recognized her. I had been in a class with Amy six years earlier. It was a course on African politics open to both graduate students and undergraduates. Amy had been a junior majoring in international relations; I was working toward my doctorate in African history. I hadn't known Amy personally, but I remembered her. I had been following South Africa's political struggles for years, sharing the world's joy at Nelson Mandela's release from prison and despairing as the country's political violence escalated. Amy's death felt like a punch in the gut. At a visceral level, I identified with her. I too was a young white American student at Stanford interested in South Africa, supportive of the antiapartheid struggle and an admirer of Mandela. I had been to South Africa for extended periods and had witnessed protest marches and visited black townships. But now South Africa's violence seemed personal. I followed news about Amy and her parents for years. The publicity surrounding the family came in waves and covered Amy's death, her family's visit to South Africa two months later, the trials of her killers, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's amnesty hearings, the establishment of the Amy Biehl Foundation, and Linda and Peter Biehl's relationship with two of the young men convicted of Amy's murder. While following news about the Biehls, I pursued my research interests in the antiapartheid movement and focused on the historical contributions of two black South African leaders—Dr. Alfred B. Xuma, the president of the African National Congress in the 1940s, and the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu. As I did so, I came to believe that Amy Biehl's story should also be woven into the narrative of South Africa's freedom struggle.

This book looks at how Amy Biehl and her family became part of South African history. Part I focuses on Amy's life and death. The rough outline of her story is well known, but her activities in South Africa are not. The simplified narrative—that Amy was an exchange student working on voter education in South Africa when she was killed—was not technically correct. Her previous work

in Africa was unknown to most journalists, as were the range of her activities and contacts in South Africa in 1992–93. Amy witnessed South Africa's transition to democracy up close, especially women's efforts to participate in this transition and enshrine their rights in new ways. Amy sometimes found it difficult to balance her role as a scholar and an activist, but as she attempted to do so, she experienced parts of South African life that were usually unknown to outsiders. Documenting her range of contacts in antiapartheid groups and women's organizations also helps explain the extraordinary outcry over her death. Appalled and embarrassed by her murder, many in South Africa's liberation movement eulogized her as "a comrade" and "a sister."

Amy often criticized the South African press for focusing on the relatively few white victims of political violence when the majority of victims were black. Ironically, her death received enormous international publicity. It provoked wide-ranging discussions about South Africa's past, present, and future. It also highlighted many of South Africa's fault lines, especially those of race, politics, generation, and gender. In the United States, some compared Amy with American civil rights icons who had sacrificed their lives for racial justice. Others feared that the undue focus on her death would obscure the sacrifices made by many more black South Africans.

Part II focuses on Amy's parents—their establishment of the Amy Biehl Foundation, their participation in South Africa's Truth Commission, and their eventual reconciliation with some of the young men involved in Amy's death. Peter and Linda Biehl's forgiveness and their establishment of the Amy Biehl Foundation were among South Africa's most heralded stories of reconciliation. To many observers, the couple personified the values promoted by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu as they tried to unite a long-divided nation. The Biehls seemed to symbolize the triumph of the human spirit after the tragedy of apartheid, which was part of the narrative of the "rainbow nation" that Mandela, Tutu, and others were trying to construct. Despite the accolades and attention, the Biehls faced constant challenges and controversies. Just as Amy's murder had caused South Africans to reflect on the state of their nation, the amnesty hearings for Amy's killers sparked a national conversation about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Was the commission helping or harming the country's future prospects? What was the difference between "retributive" justice and "restorative" justice, and which was preferable? While praised by many observers, the Biehls' statements and actions generated heated debate. Some South Africans were uncomfortable or even offended by their attitude toward amnesty. While Peter and Linda embraced the amnesty process, many South Africans rejected it. Some

black and white South Africans opposed amnesty in the Biehl case in particular, believing that Amy's murder was an inexcusable hate crime. The enormous controversy that erupted after the convicted men received amnesty reflected the wider controversies surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and showed that South Africa's wounds were still raw.

Just as in Amy's case, the narrative surrounding the Biehls has been simplified over the years. Initially, Peter and Linda never dreamed of befriending Amy's killers. They did not even support amnesty at first. Their reconciliation was a journey, not an immediate reaction, a fact that often got lost in the blizzard of media coverage. When the Biehls eventually hired two of the amnestied men to work at the Amy Biehl Foundation, it challenged both Americans and South Africans to envision forgiveness in new ways. Some disapproved of the Biehls' relationship with the two men, finding it inexplicable and even perverse. But despite the controversies, the Biehls' legacy as international role models of forgiveness and reconciliation would inspire others for decades to come.

In the years since her death, Amy Biehl has been memorialized in numerous ways—by the monument in Gugulethu, in a novel and play by Sindiwe Magona (*Mother to Mother*), in a documentary film on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Long Night's Journey into Day*), and through the continuing work of the Amy Biehl Foundation. In 2016, production began for a dramatic film about Amy, her parents, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the minds of many South Africans and Americans, the Biehls' story lives on. This book seeks to explain why.