

**VOICES OF RESILIENCE: A LIVING HISTORY OF THE
KENNETH GARDENS MUNICIPAL HOUSING ESTATE IN
DURBAN**

by MONIQUE MARKS, KIRA ERWIN and TAMLYNN FLEETWOOD; with a
photo essay by CEDRIC NUNN

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MANY years ago, I visited a friend of mine, a single mother, in a flat in Kenneth Gardens. I remember being impressed by the space, the light and the quality of the buildings, set in wonderful landscaped gardens. Jacqui was smug about her allocation of the flat, almost inferring competition for space. It was from these memories that I took the opportunity to review *Voices of Resilience*, a well-assembled work that combines the voices of multiple residents of Kenneth Gardens together with a closer analysis of belonging and memory.

While memory studies and oral histories are themselves problematic, the presentation of these transcribed memories as stand-alone stories means that they each present an independent version of relationships and situations that people living in Kenneth Gardens experience. The interviews are presented as a series of one-sided conversations, in which the interviewers probe the experiences of residents, rather than request specific answers to specific topics. This makes the autobiographies rich, energetic and overlaid with experiences littered with trauma, joy, love and acceptance. The authors preface the independent stories with a more academic slant, and then roll them out as a series of discussions that include long-time residents, the fall of the Group Areas Act and new people moving into the estate as a result, as well as those who have recently moved in.

Kira Erwin remembers growing up in Kenneth Gardens, and contributes a preface to the stories of the other residents – in many ways sashaying between the academic introduction and the independent voices of the different residents who were interviewed over a number of years. Stories of struggle, resistance, resilience, poverty and love are embedded in a silent South Africa that is not experienced in the suburbs. It tells of relationships that transcend race and prejudice, common stories of battling drugs, cancer, HIV and gender-based violence.

Nunn's photo essay slots in towards the end of the book, a dense section of photographs depicting the quotidian lives of people in Kenneth Gardens. The paper is of good quality and while the decision to place his essay as such is possibly part of an editorial chapterisation, for this reader his photos may have been better placed scattered through the book to continually evoke the textures and landscapes of Kenneth Gardens. Of particular interest in Nunn's photographs are washing lines, almost in themselves a symbolic point of meeting for the residents; coming through in many of the transcripts as places of meeting and greeting. Fundamentally, the washing lines are a social leveller, a thread that permeates the stories in the book.

Voices of Resilience ends with a conclusion about making meaning. It identifies common threads as 'precarious

ousness', 'being together' and 'deficits, troubles and vexations', which result in a substructure of 'resilience and innovation'.

Many oral histories run the risk of romanticisation, inaccurate transcription, biased assumptions and crafted conclusions. *Voices of Resilience* is not an oral history; it is a rich collection of stories that offer a scarcely available view into the everyday lives of everyday

South African people. Monique Marks, Kira Erwin and Tamlynn Fleetwood have produced a nuanced, elegant and upfront narrative in which they have managed to let ordinary people speak in an extraordinary manner, presenting scholarship in memory studies and oral history within both academic and everyday accessible contexts.

DEBBIE WHELAN