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ARTICLE



## The anti-apartheid movement at Grand Valley State College in West Michigan

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### ABSTRACT

The history of the anti-apartheid movement at Michigan's public universities tends to focus on MSU in Lansing, UM in Ann Arbor, and WMU in Kalamazoo. The anti-apartheid movement outside of these and a few less-well-known cases remains largely unknown. Drawing on a small selection of archival documents, this essay explores the history of the anti-apartheid movement at Grand Valley State College in West Michigan, a region presently most well known for its conservative politics. This surprising microhistory includes contributions from two important South Africans, Allan Boesak and Ben Khoapa, dedicated organizing by students on campus, and a series of articles published in the student newspaper, *The Lanthorn*.

### KEYWORDS

Anti-apartheid movement;  
Michigan; Ben Khoapa;  
Special AKA; Allan Boesak

The history of the anti-apartheid movement at Michigan's flagship universities—Michigan State University (MSU) in East Lansing and the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor—is well-known. Also somewhat well-documented are events at Western Michigan University (WMU) in Kalamazoo, which was the second institute of higher learning in Michigan to fully divest from South Africa, after MSU. Yet the anti-apartheid movement in the state's western colleges and universities outside of Kalamazoo remains largely undocumented. Drawing on a small selection of archival documents, this essay explores the history of the anti-apartheid movement at Grand Valley State College (GVSC, now Grand Valley State University) in West Michigan, a region presently most well known for its conservative political climate. The microhistory that emerges from these documents is that of a campus movement that emerged relatively late compared to others, but which burned brightly in the context of major structural changes taking place at the college.

In her history of the anti-apartheid movement in the United States, Janice Love focuses an entire chapter on Michigan, which she argues exemplifies the decentralized, segmented, and reticulated nature of the US anti-apartheid movement with its significant diversity of ideologies, membership, strategies, and goals. Likewise, William Minter, Gail Hovey, and Charles Cobb Jr. focus significant attention on Michigan in their history of American activists agitating for African liberation.

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Michigan was an ideal environment for the anti-apartheid movement to grow. The state had politicians and labor unions sympathetic to the cause, along with many African students and Americans who had spent time in Africa. Lansing, the state capital, became the center of the movement in Michigan. In East Lansing, MSU had the largest African Studies department in the country and many specialized centers interested in Africa. Founded in East Lansing in 1972, the Southern Africa Liberation Committee (SALC) played an important role in the anti-apartheid movement across the state. Subsequently, MSU divested from South Africa in 1978. One year later, African Studies professor Howard Wolpe, from nearby Kalamazoo College, was elected to the US Congress and went on to head the House Africa Subcommittee, playing an important role in agitating for the Comprehensive Apartheid Act. Love concludes that in the case of Michigan, university-based organizations provided the “principal impetus for initiating anti-apartheid legislative campaigns in Michigan.” A total of nineteen pieces of legislation concerning South Africa were advanced in the Michigan legislature between 1978 and 1985.<sup>1</sup>

After 1978, anti-apartheid organizing across Michigan took place against the backdrop of the MSU divestment and a new push by SALC and others for legislation at the state level. In conservative West Michigan, activism at WMU was seen as exceptional. *The Michigan Daily*, the student newspaper at UM, reported, “it’s a familiar scenario – irate students being arrested by police for disrupting a meeting of University administrators, while demanding their university divest its holdings in South Africa. But the location isn’t Ann Arbor in this case – it’s Kalamazoo, at the Western Michigan University.”<sup>2</sup> At WMU, faculty played a significant role in the South African Solidarity Organization (SASO). Organizing began in 1978 and when the administration was unresponsive, 125 demonstrators disrupted an October 1979 trustee meeting, resulting in eleven arrests. A trial followed and the protestors were found not guilty, leading to increased student support. Further actions drew media attention and forced the trustees to condemn apartheid in spring 1981. A faculty senate call for disinvestment followed and divestment was accomplished in 1983. The amount was relatively small: \$200,000, vs. \$7,200,000 at Michigan State. SASO also participated in the coalition lobbying for a state law requiring colleges and universities to divest from US companies with investments in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> And WMU’s organizing extended beyond the state level. At a 1981 American Committee on Africa (ACOA) student organizing conference, members of SASO co-chaired a workshop on divestment along with members of Students United Against Apartheid at Berea College.<sup>4</sup>

Compared with MSU and WMU, other universities in Michigan were slow to move toward divestment. But after 1982 this became a moot point. On the last day of the year, Governor William Milliken, a Republican, signed Public Act 512 into law

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<sup>1</sup>Love, *The U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement*, 47, 161; Minter et al., *No Easy Victories*, 147–8; Larson, “The Transnational and Local Dimensions,” 147–59. Ultimately, MSU became the institutional home of the African Activist Archive Project (AAAP), which aims to document and preserve “activist organizing in the United States in solidarity with African struggles against colonialism, apartheid, and injustice.” <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/about>.

<sup>2</sup>Steve Hook, “S. Africa debated at WMU,” *The Michigan Daily*, October 21, 1979, 3.

<sup>3</sup>Baldwin and Brown, *Economic Actions Against Apartheid*, 13, 42.

<sup>4</sup>Nessen, *Report on National Student Anti-Apartheid Strategy Conference*.

and Michigan became the first state requiring public colleges and universities to divest from organizations doing business in South Africa.<sup>5</sup>

With college and university divestment a done deal, the focus of the anti-apartheid movement shifted toward legislation to divest the state pension fund as well as other actions to condemn and isolate the apartheid government. In West Michigan, one element that shaped the anti-apartheid movement at GVSC and on other college campuses was the debate over apartheid within the Reformed Church, which has a significant presence in the region. Among the people who played a role in this debate was Allan Boesak, a South African activist and member of the Dutch Reformed Church who was the first nonwhite to teach at Calvin College in Grand Rapids before returning to South Africa in 1981. In a lecture delivered shortly after he returned home, Boesak concluded, “it is Reformed Christians who have spent years working out the details of apartheid, as a church policy and as a political policy. It is Reformed Christians who have presented this policy to the Afrikaner as the only possible solution, as an expression of the will of God for South Africa.”<sup>6</sup> In 1983, the Reformed Church in America, with which Calvin was affiliated, divested its portfolio from South Africa. This came after nearly twenty years of agitation against apartheid by the denomination.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, in 1985, the Christian Reformed Church of North America determined at a meeting in Grand Rapids to continue the relationship with its counterparts in South Africa even though the church had declared that apartheid was a sin and that justifications of it were heresy the previous year.<sup>8</sup> At the level of local government, Grand Rapids—only 20 minutes from GVSC—bore fruit for the anti-apartheid movement. The city resolved to divest in 1982, followed by Grand Rapids Public Schools in 1985. The Kent County Commission, however, refused to follow.<sup>9</sup> These events at the state, regional, and local level provided some of the context for the anti-apartheid movement at GVSC.

In his reflection on successfully helping to organize SALC at MSU, Frank Beeman observed the importance of getting the student newspaper to cover the movement early on.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, at GVSC, *The Lanthorn* was integral to the anti-apartheid movement. But before 1985, South Africa appeared infrequently in its pages. In April of 1980, the newspaper published a summary of the college and university divestiture bill as well as the situation in South Africa, with contributing editor Charles Vander Woude describing the situation in South Africa in dispassionate but damning language.<sup>11</sup> In December of the same year, *The Lanthorn* published a College Press Service (CPS) report on the Institute of Policy Studies review of the failures of the Sullivan Principles, wryly observing that “the release of the less-than-glowing report cards, however, has yet to shake the faith of college administrators.”<sup>12</sup> Another CPS

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<sup>5</sup>The Michigan Circuit Court upheld Public Act 512 in 1985 but it was overturned by the Michigan Court of Appeals in 1988. Associated Press, “Michigan Law on South Africa Investments Upset,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1988, 22. By then, most universities had complied.

<sup>6</sup>Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 86.

<sup>7</sup>Mark I. Pinsky, “Reformed Church Clashes with S. African Cousin on Apartheid,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1986.

<sup>8</sup>Associated Press, “Christian Reformed Synod Retains Ties With South African Church,” June 2, 1985.

<sup>9</sup>Jeff Smith of the Grand Rapids People’s History Project has documented this movement and assembled many of the primary archival documents online at <https://grpeopleshistory.org/category/anti-apartheid-movement>.

<sup>10</sup>Minter et al., *No Easy Victories*, 150.

<sup>11</sup>Charles Vander Woude, “Rights Groups Continue to Denounce S. Africa,” *The Lanthorn*, April 24, 1980, 1, 3.

<sup>12</sup>College Press Service, “Sullivan Reviews Mixed,” *The Lanthorn*, December 17, 1980, 1–2.



**Figure 1.** Ben Khoapa at Grand Valley State College. Undated. Courtesy of Grand Valley State University Special Collections and University Archives.

article appeared in March 1981 detailing divestment efforts at other universities across the country.<sup>13</sup> Then, in January of 1982, *The Lanthorn* published a letter from Linda Linteau, a member of the Public Interest Research Group in Michigan organization at MSU, encouraging readers to support the state-level bill to require college and university divestment.<sup>14</sup> But South Africa was still barely on the radar at GVSC.

That began to change after 1983, when Ben Khoapa joined the faculty of the School of Social Work at GVSC (Figure 1). Khoapa was the former National Secretary for the South African National Council of YMCAS and Executive Director of Black Community Programs Limited in Durban, part of the Black Consciousness Movement. In 1977, as Khoapa's banning order was about to expire, it became clear that he might be assassinated or at least expelled from Durban, so he left the country. He went to Europe first, and then the United States, completing his PhD at Case Western Reserve. Khoapa describes his arrival in West Michigan, saying he didn't know he was going to another Dutch settlement until he arrived, but that he "liked

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<sup>13</sup>College Press Service, "College Funds Withdrawn from Bank Aiding South Africa Policies," *The Lanthorn*, March 26, 1981, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Linda, Linteau, letter to the editor, *The Lanthorn*, January 28, 1982. That same month, ACOA reported that students from Michigan State were helping students at GVSC to organize an anti-apartheid group. "U.S. Student Anti-Apartheid Movement Newsletter," American Committee on Africa, January 1982.

working at the university because it had some very naïve Dutch people.”<sup>15</sup> During his time at GVSC, he wrote numerous articles about South Africa and spoke and debated across the country. In March of 1984, the *Grand Valley Forum*, the faculty and staff newsletter, announced an informal discussion to be led by Khoapa titled “South Africa: Friend or Foe of the United States?”<sup>16</sup> As it happened in the spring of his first year at the college, this was possibly the first campus-wide event with which Khoapa was involved. Then, at the beginning of the 1985–1986 school year, Khoapa gave a speech on campus attended by about 100 people, lighting a fire that would burn brightly on campus that school year.<sup>17</sup>

A key figure in *The Lanthorn’s* coverage of the anti-apartheid movement during the 1985–1986 school year was Henry Edward Hardy. Hardy had arrived at GVSC in 1981, one year after dropping out of UM. At GVSC he enrolled in the Arts and Media concentration at William James College, an interdisciplinary, ungraded experimental college founded in 1971. He also became involved in student government, *The Lanthorn*, and the independent, student-run radio station, WSRX. Unfortunately, while Hardy was settling into the “Berkeley of the Midwest,” the college was also undergoing major structural changes. Beginning in the late 1970s, Richard DeVos, billionaire Republican and co-founder of Amway, had undertaken an effort to reshape society in the image of the new religious right. As a member of the GVSC Board of Control and subsequently as President of the Grand Valley University Foundation Board, DeVos brought this plan to bear on a campus that many Republicans in West Michigan associated with the counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s. First on the chopping block in 1980 was Thomas Jefferson College, an experimental college founded in 1968. Then, in 1982, college administrators shut down WSRX and replaced it with WGVU, a professionalized, nonstudent radio station. Finally, William James College was shuttered at the end of the 1982–1983 school year. When I interviewed him in 2022, Hardy reflected that “in a way, in 84, apartheid was an appealing place for this group of people who had lost every battle and everything that was important to us, to attach ourselves to something that was forward looking and not just sour grapes.” As Hardy recalls, it was The Special AKA’s 1984 single “Free Nelson Mandela,” which he first heard as musical director at WGVU, that lent immediacy to the anti-apartheid movement. He also clarifies, “my relationship with apartheid wasn’t really a single issue, I saw it as part of... we worked on no war in El Salvador. We worked on no draft. We worked on consumer issues through PIRGM, the public interest research group. And all these things were tied together. And a lot of what I was doing was creating media scenes in order to draw attention to a particular issue.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>“Ben Khoapa interviewed by David Wiley,” May 7, 2006, Michigan State University, <https://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/video.php?kid=163-572-48>; “University Vita Files”; Khoapa, “Brain Drain and Study Abroad.”

<sup>16</sup>“Coming Events,” *Grand Valley Forum*, March 26, 1984, 1.

<sup>17</sup>A *Grand Rapids Press* article focused on Khoapa’s description of the youth movement in the country, crumbling support for apartheid among young whites in that country, the policies of the Carter and Reagan administration, and the possibility of revolutionary violence. “University Vita Files.”

<sup>18</sup>Hardy laments, “the Amway-ization of Grand Valley proved to be a small model of the Amway-ization of West Michigan and how it’s become this redoubt of conservative Christian identity Trumpist Politics. It was not that then. There was a very strong progressive movement in West Michigan and Bill Seidman and the people who funded and politically supported Grand Valley were part of that.” Hardy, interview.

In April of 1985, Hardy did just that when he participated in a small protest against apartheid on campus, followed by a forty-eight hour sit-in that he said was intended “to make people aware that the U.S. is supporting a system in South Africa of tyranny and brutal, racial oppression.” The sit-in was attended by GVSC President Arend Lubbers, and Maurice Ngakany, the Assistant General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches who was living in Flint at the time, spoke. Letters of support from Congressmen Howard Wolpe and Paul Henry were read.<sup>19</sup> In the fall, Hardy joined *The Lanthorn* as a staff writer and on October 9 he published his first two articles on South Africa, detailing recent events in the country. Surely many of the students reading Hardy’s column had little knowledge of the apartheid system. He wrote, “by awakening and educating ourselves about the economic underpinnings which allow the system of apartheid to profit, we also take the first step in freeing ourselves from the same authoritarian tendencies. This is the primary importance of the push for economic sanctions against South Africa.”

Hardy also addressed the issue of “whataboutism” that continues to occur in discussions of Palestine and the BDS movement: “why should these events in South Africa call for an extraordinary response when torture and abuse exists also in other countries such as Iran and the Soviet Union?” His answer was that since the financial and strategic interests of the United States were involved, it should follow that US sanctions could have a “profound impact” on the South African economy by forcing the companies who had “helped to build the prison which is South Africa” to change. In the face of increased revolutionary activity in South Africa, Hardy articulated a choice for readers: “will we choose the people who are fighting for their freedom, or will we choose to protect the white men with the big bank accounts as we have in Central America? Will we, in another five years, be financing another set of ‘contras’, fighting for their ‘freedom’ from the ‘Communist’ liberation front?” Hardy concluded by calling for an end to “neocolonial domination of the third world.”<sup>20</sup> In a second article, Hardy detailed Khoapa’s September speech on campus, focusing on the Black Consciousness Movement, the future of African socialism, Khoapa’s advice that Americans should “declare solidarity with people fighting for justice without preopinion of setting conditions,” and his conclusion that the Reagan administration policies were “an insult to our people.”<sup>21</sup>

In October of 1985, South Africa appeared frequently in *The Lanthorn*. In a guest editorial on October 16, David Conklin, State Treasurer of the Michigan College Republicans, described the experience of Tony Zagotta, president of the Illinois State University College Republicans, who was invited to visit South Africa by the National Student Federation of South Africa. Zagotta claimed, “from what I saw on television in the United States, I expected blacks to be treated far worse then they actually were and much more economically deprived.” Conklin then went on to argue, “I feel as a former member of the media community that we have a liberal biase,” claiming that “if America supports disinvestment, all of the people, black, white, and colored, will

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<sup>19</sup>“Students Protest Foreign Policy,” *The Lanthorn*, April 23, 1985, 1; David Waterstradt, “Students Hold 48-hour Apartheid Vigil,” *The Lanthorn*, April 30, 1985, 1.

<sup>20</sup>Henry E. Hardy, “South African Situation Still a Tragedy,” *The Lanthorn*, October 9, 1985, 9–10.

<sup>21</sup>Henry E. Hardy, “GVSC Professor Speaks on Apartheid,” *The Lanthorn*, October 9, 1985, 4.

suffer anti-growth ailments that many of its neighboring countries are now suffering.”<sup>22</sup> A week later, GVSC student Jim Sanzone responded to Conklin in a guest editorial of his own. Describing Conklin’s portrayal of life in South Africa as consisting of “half-truths,” Sanzone took a satirical approach to the whole matter, concluding, “gosh, the more I think about this maybe I am wrong. Keeping apartheid would guarantee my grandma’s stocks a good return.”<sup>23</sup> This was followed two weeks later by *The Lanthorn’s* publication of Hardy’s interview with President Lubbers. Hardy asked how current student activism around South Africa compared to student activism during the Civil Rights movement and the US war in Vietnam. Lubbers waffled about immediacy and distance: “amongst the young people, there has always been an idealistic tendency. And I think there is a need for a cause, and I think that there are many people, if the cause isn’t presented to them right now, they’ll find one. And in some respects I think in the United States this great interest in South Africa came up because it is a serious problem.” Hardy brought up the recent decision by the Grand Rapids Board of Education to quit doing business with companies operating in South Africa and asked if GVSC would commit to doing the same. Lubbers demurred that he would have to think about it because the university was in the middle of a technological transition and had just purchased an IBM computer.<sup>24</sup>

Despite Lubbers’ lukewarm support, the anti-apartheid movement at GVSC and in the Grand Rapids area was in full swing. At the beginning of November, a week after his interview with Lubbers, Hardy reported on an anti-apartheid rally that had taken place on October 20 at Calder Plaza in downtown Grand Rapids. Among the speakers were Khoapa, John Conyers, Doug Van Doren of Christ Community Church, and Grand Rapids black community leader Imam Noah Setfulah.<sup>25</sup> Two weeks later, *The Lanthorn* published a letter to the editor from Representative Perry Bullard, Chair of the Michigan House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, calling on students to support divestment of Michigan state pension funds. He reflected, “throughout this country’s history, students have been out front with the call for justice. Students marched and led voter registration drives in the South during the civil rights struggles of the early sixties. Students constantly pricked the general public’s conscience about Vietnam until people throughout all sectors of our society called for an end. And now, students have taken the leadership in the antiapartheid movement. Carry that leadership forward by working for Michigan Divestment.”<sup>26</sup>

Months of organizing at GVSC led to the November 27 announcement of the formation of Students Against Apartheid (SAA), a new student organization with plans to engage in lobbying, lecturing, discussing, demonstrating, and screening films and videos. The organization intended to advocate for an anti-apartheid bill in the All College Academic Senate and to lobby for a class in Third World history and politics, along with having a campus lounge named for Nelson Mandela and an accompanying mural.<sup>27</sup> SAA succeeded at meeting many of its objectives. On October 10, the

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<sup>22</sup>David Conklin, “South Africa Making Progress,” *The Lanthorn*, October 16, 1985, 11.

<sup>23</sup>Jim Sanzone, “Signs of Progress in South Africa are Misleading,” *The Lanthorn*, October 23, 1985, 5.

<sup>24</sup>Hardy, “The Lanthorn Talks with President Lubbers,” *The Lanthorn*, October 30, 1985, 8–9.

<sup>25</sup>Hardy, “Apartheid Rally in Grand Rapids,” *The Lanthorn*, November 6, 1985, 2.

<sup>26</sup>Perry Bullard, letter to the editor, *The Lanthorn*, November 20, 1985.

<sup>27</sup>Hardy, “Student Apartheid Group Formed,” *The Lanthorn*, November 27, 1985, 2.



Student Senate adopted a resolution against apartheid, calling on the administration and the Board of Control to take action. Lubbers responded by reminding the Student Senate that GVSC had fully divested and asked for “further suggestions” for actions that might be undertaken. In December the faculty All-College Senate endorsed the spirit of the Student Senate resolution and expressed its own opposition to apartheid. In addition, the All-College Senate approved two motions based on a longer draft resolution that Hardy had authored earlier in the year calling for the award of an honorary degree to Nelson Mandela or another South African leader and endorsing SAA’s goal of creating a course on Third World culture and issues in global human rights.<sup>28</sup>

Returning from winter break in 1986, *The Lanthorn* continued to focus attention on South Africa, much of it occasioned by the first national Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Hardy recalled King’s admonition that if “just two countries, Britain and the United States, could be persuaded to end all economic interaction with the South African regime, they could bring that government to its knees.” Hardy also published a report on the death and funeral for Molly Blackburn, the white South African activist who had recently died in a car accident. *Lanthorn* editor Oran Rankin situated the newspaper’s struggle for independence from college administrators as related to the ongoing struggle against the “South African Nazi Regime.” There was also a new letter from Conklin, who had changed his mind and was now supporting the legislation requiring Michigan’s pension funds to divest, while emphasizing that “this letter of support for divestment is not a letter of support for a revolution or those leaders who would cause one if given a chance.” Finally, Joseph A. Braun reported that Campus Ministry planned to invite South African Reverend Sidney Ngobe, who was attending Western Theological Seminary in nearby Holland, to come to GVSC to speak.<sup>29</sup>

Still, tensions remained on campus. In the February 12 *Lanthorn*, Hardy reported that the college’s administration was “up to its old dirty tricks.” He recalled that following the faculty and student senate resolutions, the College Board of Control had voted to condemn apartheid at its last meeting of the year. Lubbers, too, had claimed that the campus was united against apartheid. But Hardy wondered why there was still no Third World course and no honorary degree for Mandela. He planned to stage a sit-in—“alone if need be”—at the next board meeting to protest the college’s inaction.<sup>30</sup> Hardy was probably unaware that on February 4, Lubbers had sent a letter to Winnie Mandela in the care of Ismail Ayob and Associates in Johannesburg asking her to come to GVSC to accept an honorary degree and to speak at the May commencement or September convocation about “the desperate situation in South Africa, and its international implications.” Lubbers described how GVSC students were active in the anti-apartheid movement and that the college awarded two scholarships every year to black South African students. He concluded, “in short, I think you would find our college to be an appropriate podium from which to speak against the violence

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<sup>28</sup>“Grand Valley State Student Senate Resolution of Apartheid Issue”; “Arend D. Lubbers to Mr. Dale Robinson”; “All College Academic Senate Meeting”; “Draft Resolution Expressing Support for Civil Rights in South Africa.”

<sup>29</sup>*The Lanthorn*, January 22, 1986.

<sup>30</sup>Hardy, “Sit-in Planned,” *The Lanthorn*, February 12, 1986, 5, 12.

and horror of apartheid in South Africa.” He asked for a number at which he might reach her to discuss the plans further.<sup>31</sup>

Lubbers announced his invitation to Mandela at the February 14 board meeting and Hardy responded by writing, “despite the qualms of some junior administrators, President Lubbers has placed us on the side of freedom and justice and against the mad corporate greed which leads our predatory companies to South Africa in search of gold, diamonds, uranium, and cheap and easily exploited labor.” He concluded, “I applaud President Lubbers wholeheartedly.”<sup>32</sup> A month later with the end of his time as an undergraduate in sight, Hardy recited some of the highlights of the anti-apartheid movement in West Michigan, tracing them back to the first national MLK Day that January.<sup>33</sup> Again, he praised Lubbers’ invitation to Mandela as a “moving and sincere” gesture from a man with a “bland exterior” but a “good heart.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet the depth of Lubbers’ commitment is unclear. His papers from the period are not fully catalogued, but a few clues about his politics vis-à-vis South Africa exist. A decade before he offered an honorary degree to Mandela, Lubbers introduced former Calvin College President William Spoelhof at a September 1987 Rotary Club meeting. Spoelhof had recently traveled to South Africa on behalf of USAID and Lubbers praised him as the “best informed person about South Africa and its troubles that we have in this Rotary Club, the City of Grand Rapids, and perhaps the State of Michigan.”<sup>35</sup> But Spoelhof’s credentials are suspect. At the beginning of the 1970s, when he was still president, Calvin had faced significant pressure to recruit more black students. To make the few black students on campus feel more welcome, Spoelhof suggested a special dinner featuring soul food and a song or other performance, but worried the plan might “provoke a whole series of demands” by the black students.<sup>36</sup> Lubbers’ politics were perhaps more clear when, fifteen years after offering Mandela an honorary degree, he introduced F.W. De Klerk at an Economic Club of Grand Rapids dinner as having “led the peaceful revolution rather than wait to react to what might have been a less peaceful one.” Lubbers continued, “now through the F. W. de Klerk Foundation he devotes resources and time to assure the success and stability of the full democracy that his courage and intelligence brought into being.”<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, Hardy began to wonder if Mandela had ever received the invitation to accept the honorary degree or if the administration had even attempted to contact her. He reflected that while Grand Valley had led the way in divesting once required by law, anti-war and anti-apartheid activists remained a minority at the school. He worried how future leftist activists on campus would navigate the generally conservative climate of GVSC, concluding that “we are supposed to work ‘within the system.’”

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<sup>31</sup>“Arend D. Lubbers to Ms. Winnie Mandela.”

<sup>32</sup>Hardy, “Three Cheers for President Lubbers,” *The Lanthorn*, February 19, 1986, 4.

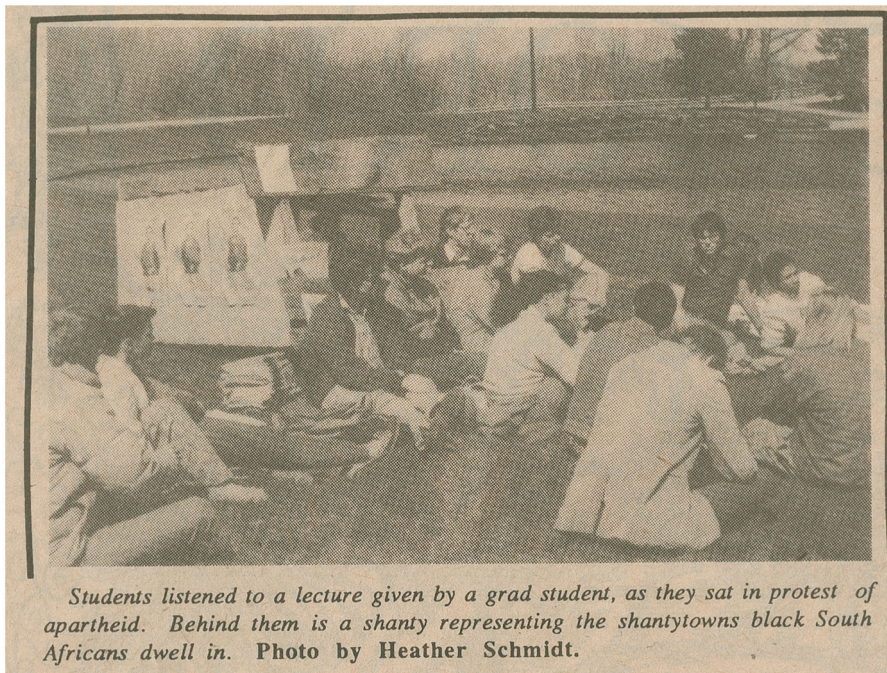
<sup>33</sup>Hardy, “Anti-Apartheid Protests Spread,” *The Lanthorn*, March 19, 1986, 1, 6, 8.

<sup>34</sup>Hardy, “What I like about West Michigan,” *The Lanthorn*, March 19, 1986, 5.

<sup>35</sup>Lubbers, “Introduction of Dr. William Spoelhof.”

<sup>36</sup>Curtis, *Colorblind Christians*, 82, 97.

<sup>37</sup>Lubbers, “Introduction of F. W. de Klerk.” Lubbers was a graduate of Hope College and member of the Reformed Church in America.



**Figure 2.** GVSC students protesting apartheid during Yolanda King visit on April 11, 1986. Courtesy of Grand Valley State University Special Collections and University Archives.

But the system at bland valley is profoundly regressive, retreating into the platitudes of the 1950s and away from the progressive and forward looking.”<sup>38</sup>

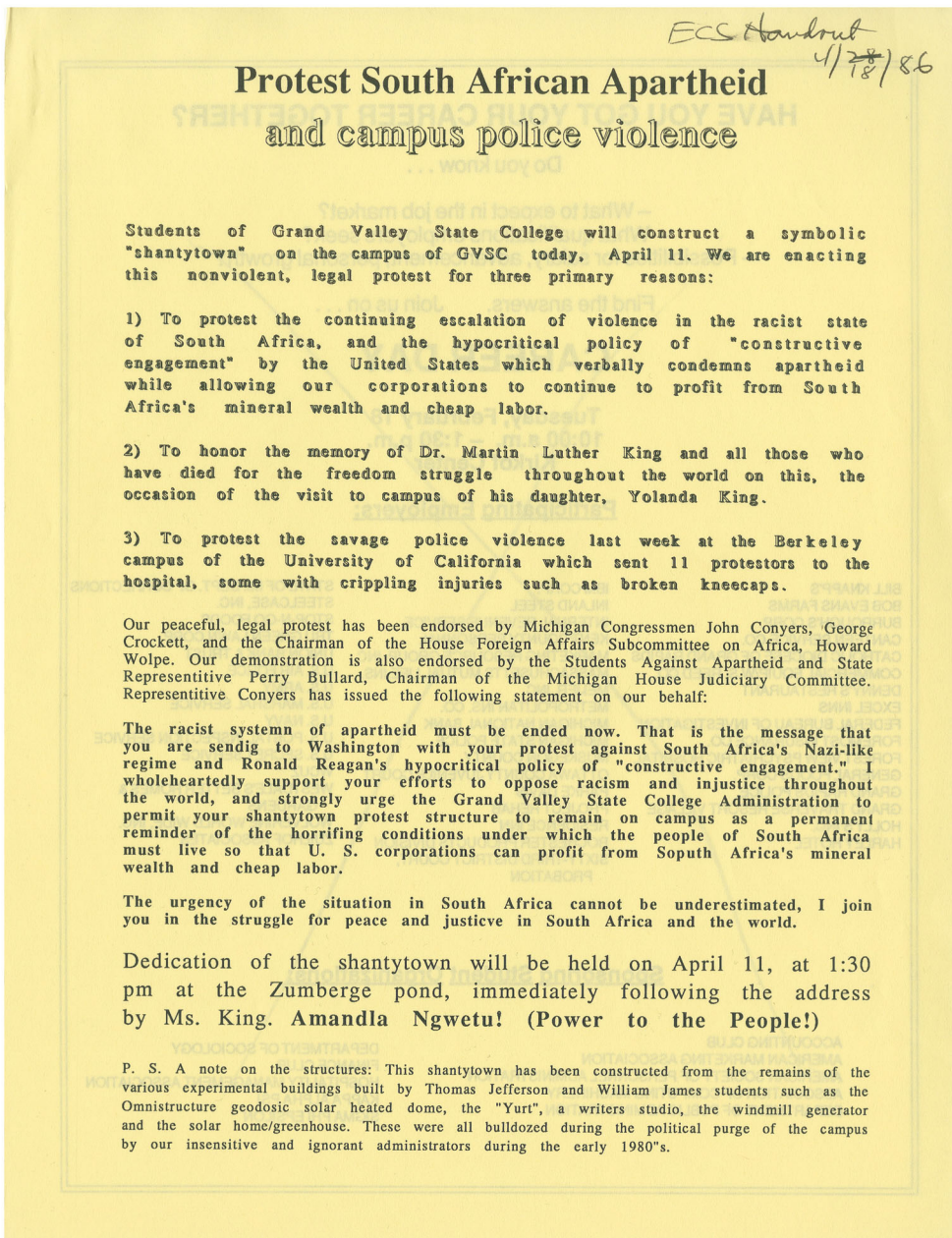
On Friday, April 11, 1986, a year of anti-apartheid activism at GVSC culminated in the visit of Yolanda King to campus, where she told a standing-room only audience in the Louis Armstrong Theater that “our fight is not nearly over, the dream has yet to be reached. For our brothers and sisters in South Africa and for millions here in the United States, equality still hasn’t been reached.”<sup>39</sup> In a letter to the editor published in *The Lanthorn*, King wrote that “it is invigorating to know of the activities taking place here at Grand Valley State College in support of the Free South Africa Movement.”<sup>40</sup> The same day that King spoke, SAA erected a shanty to draw attention to apartheid and police violence against protestors in Berkeley (Figures 2 and 3). One of the twenty protestors in attendance opined, “I would hope that the administration of GVSC will remain consistent with its usually progressive and positive stand against apartheid, by not removing the shanty in order that it remain to serve its purpose.”<sup>41</sup> In a letter published in *The Lanthorn* John Conyers agreed, urging the

<sup>38</sup>Hardy, “The Need to Encourage Peaceful Dissent,” *The Lanthorn*, April 9, 1986, 4.

<sup>39</sup>Brad Koester, “Yolanda King Delivers Inspirational Lecture,” *The Lanthorn*, April 16, 1986, 1. Hardy credits Toni Turner, Grand Valley’s Affirmative Action Officer and Director of Special Student Services at the time, for making King’s visit happen. Hardy, interview.

<sup>40</sup>Yolanda King, letter to the editor, *The Lanthorn*, April 16, 1986.

<sup>41</sup>“Protest South African Apartheid and Campus Police Violence”; Oran Rankin, “Anti-Apartheid Students Hold Protest at Shanty,” *The Lanthorn*, April 16, 1986, 2.



**Figure 3.** Students Against Apartheid flyer. Courtesy of Grand Valley State University Special Collections and University Archives.

administration to let it remain standing.<sup>42</sup> For his part, Hardy wrote, “the campus anti-apartheid protestors, including myself, have prepared a resolution for the faculty ECS Executive Committee of the Senate urging that the shantytown structure be

<sup>42</sup>John Conyers, letter to the editor, *The Lanthorn*, April 16, 1986.

made a permanent part of the campus. If they do not agree, we will remove it ourselves, because we have decided to respect the democratic governance process here at GVSC. Those who have an interest in this issue pro or con are encouraged to present their views in a peaceful and responsible manner in this forum, rather than taking the law into their own hands.”<sup>43</sup> What happened next is unclear, but one letter to the editor alleged that Student Senator John Gartner had attempted to recruit friends to help him destroy the shanty.<sup>44</sup> And in a letter to the Executive Committee of the faculty senate several days later, Hardy explained that the shanty had been vandalized and destroyed. Hardy asked that the committee condemn the violation of students’ First Amendment rights and investigate whether or not Mandela had ever received the latter Lubbers claimed to have sent. Hardy also called for more senate actions against apartheid, once more bringing up the Third World course.<sup>45</sup> A week later, a letter to the *Lantern* editor complained that the inclusion of police violence and college administration as targets of the protests alienated some people.<sup>46</sup> There was no mention of South Africa in the final *Lantern* issue of the school year and SAA appears to have gone dormant as soon as Hardy graduated. When I asked Hardy what happened to SAA after he graduated, he replied, “Well, I mean, that’s because it didn’t really exist. That was me operating under an alias, me and my friends. But there was no formal organization, no meetings, no agenda, and really, there was no dissent.” He estimated that at its high point, about 30 students were involved in the anti-apartheid movement on campus.<sup>47</sup>

Khoapa continued to be active. In August of 1986 he spoke on “South Africa of the Future” at Kalamazoo College. After the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in October, Khoapa spoke about the role of Black churches in South Africa at Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids. He was joined by Leonard Sweetman, Jr. a professor of religion and theology from Calvin College who had edited *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, a collection of lectures by Allan Boesak. Khoapa appeared later that month in a Christian Program Series at the Grand Rapids Community Center titled “Dialogue of South Africa: Dilemma for the U.S.?” alongside Ruth Wierenga, a member of the National Executive Committee of United Presbyterian Women and the Advisory Committee of the magazine *Concern*. A month later, *The Grand Rapids Press* reported on a panel discussion at Calvin that included Khoapa and South African Vice-Consul James Spies, who argued that South Africa had entered a “post-apartheid era.” Khoapa responded, “if apartheid had suddenly disappeared from the face of South Africa, we (blacks) would be the very first to be aware it has happened.” The discussion continued on to the morality and effectiveness of economic sanctions and corporate withdrawal with the two sharply disagreeing. Both, however, agreed that change could

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<sup>43</sup>Hardy, “Reagan’s Lies about Nicaragua; Police Attack Berkeley Anti-Apartheid Activists; Reactionaries Threaten GVSC Shantytown Demonstration,” *The Lantern*, April 16, 1986, 3.

<sup>44</sup>Curt Reynolds, letter to the editor, *The Lantern*, April 16, 1986.

<sup>45</sup>“Request for Permanent Protest Site.” Eventually, a course “Third World and the West” was established in the Department of History from 1991 to 1994.

<sup>46</sup>Sheila Klemm, letter to the editor, *The Lantern*, April 23, 1986.

<sup>47</sup>Henry Hardy, interview. In his account, Hardy describes how his advisor refused to sign his graduation paperwork because she had heard he was a communist. Ultimately, it was Khoapa who agreed to sign the paperwork.

take place without violence.<sup>48</sup> This event at Calvin was particularly noteworthy because the college subsequently divested from South Africa. The amount was small, about \$132,000, but significant.<sup>49</sup> In March of 1987, Khoapa appeared at the Ford Museum to give a talk titled “South Africa: Apartheid Under Siege.”<sup>50</sup> He was approved for a 1989–1990 sabbatical to do research on Steven Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement in Lesotho and subsequently resigned from Grand Valley. His exile ended when he returned to South Africa for good in 1994.<sup>51</sup>

Looking back, Hardy describes the climate in which the anti-apartheid movement flowered at GVSC: “there were people who were liberal and came from a liberal arts background, like Lubbers, and who was just trying to keep his head above water. And then there were people who were like South Africans in their mentality, in their white supremacy, in their Dutch reformed imperialism who ran the school.” Still, he says, “South Africa was a very good issue, and it was really non-controversial.” But by the time Hardy returned in 1991 to complete a master’s degree, Grand Valley State College had become Grand Valley State University and “politically it was just a wasteland. It’s like we are the hollow men, heads full of straw. I didn’t feel that this was my community, which was lost. And I left Grand Rapids with few regrets.”<sup>52</sup> Now, it remains easy to bemoan the stifling conservatism of West Michigan. But, ultimately, the history of the anti-apartheid movement at Grand Valley provides an important lesson, as Hardy concludes: “I don’t remember it as I’ve told it, as a series of defeats, but as a series of just, like, infinite optimism, which I kind of lack now. And I miss that feeling of being young and indomitable and fearless and feeling invincible. And if you have that, use it. Change the world.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>“Khoapa, Bennie.”

<sup>49</sup>Jeff Smith, “Calvin College took a stand against South African Apartheid by Divesting,” Grand Rapids People’s History Project, December 11, 2014, <https://grpeopleshistory.org/2014/12/11/calvin-college-took-a-stand-against-south-african-apartheid-by-divesting>.

<sup>50</sup>“Khoapa, Bennie.”

<sup>51</sup>“Ben Khoapa interviewed by David Wiley”; “Khoapa, Bennie.”

<sup>52</sup>Hardy, interview.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

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