

Nelson Mandela

Lawyer, humanitarian and Nobel laureate

The memorial service for Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela at Johannesburg's FNB Stadium on 10 December 2013 saw one of the largest gatherings of heads of state, celebrities and dignitaries in the world.

Presidents, kings and queens arrived to pay tribute to a man whose journey from rural herdsman to Nobel Peace Prize laureate had captured global imagination.

While the seeds of Mandela's greatness were planted in his beloved childhood villages of Qunu and Mvezo in the Eastern Cape, it was in South Africa's cosmopolitan commercial industrial heartland of Johannesburg that they were nurtured.

Mandela started his life in the big city as a nightwatchman at a mine compound at Crown Mines after running away from an arranged marriage that his Xhosa regent, Dalindyebo, tried to impose on him.

Mandela, ever the eloquent negotiator, eventually convinced Dalindyebo to allow him to stay in Johannesburg to study law. Mandela studied at Wits University for more than six years but eventually completed his studies through correspondence due to his increasing involvement in the African National Congress.

Mandela met his first wife, Evelyn Mase, through the Sisulus. Mase, a nurse, was the breadwinner while Mandela studied. The two had four children, but divorced after Mase grew increasingly frustrated with Mandela's political activities and rumours of philandering.

In 1956 Mandela and 156 others were arrested and tried for treason, but were all found not guilty in a trial that lasted until 1961. During this period Mandela courted and eventually married Winnie Madikizela in 1958. The couple had two daughters, Zenani and Zindzi.

At the Rivonia Trial, which began in October 1963 and ended in 1964, Mandela, Walter Sisulu and eight others were tried and sentenced to life for sabotage.

Mandela spent 18 years incarcerated on Robben Island, before being transferred to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town in 1982. He was transferred to Victor Verster Prison near Paarl in 1988.

Mandela's talks with President FW de Klerk eventually led to the unbanning of the ANC and other political organisations, followed by the release of political prisoners in 1990.

When Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison in 1990, hand in hand with his wife Winnie after 27 years in jail, the country was gripped by a wave of euphoria. Freedom was in the air.

However, this elation was soon overshadowed by the spectre of state-sponsored violence, which led Mandela to withdraw the ANC from negotiations with De Klerk.

Through Mandela's statesmanlike leadership, the country was brought back from the brink of civil war, a settlement for an interim constitution was reached and South Africa held its first democratic elections in April 1994. The election was won by the ANC and Mandela was inaugurated as president in front of thousands of jubilant South Africans and a host of world leaders.

Mandela and Winnie became estranged after his release from prison and they divorced in 1996. Two years later, when he turned 80, Mandela married Graça Machel, widow of former Mozambican president Samora Machel.

Mandela kept to his oath to serve only one term as president, handing the baton to Thabo Mbeki in 1999.

Mandela then turned the focus of his boundless energy and activism to his three charities: the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship.

During 2012 and 2013 Mandela was hospitalised on several occasions due to poor health. He eventually passed away in his Houghton home on 5 December 2013, surrounded by his wife and members of his family.



