

## From baby clothes to a future premier, Nelson Mandela touched many Calgarians

BY MICHAEL WRIGHT AND TREVOR HOWELL, CALGARY HERALD DECEMBER 6, 2013

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Yumba Matipa speaks with reverence about Nelson Mandela on the day of his passing while at a special screening of the movie about Mandela's life, *Long Walk To Freedom*, Thursday December 5, 2013 at Chinook Centre.

**Photograph by:** Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

As a child, Calgary resident Jeremy Hexham came as close as anyone could to then-imprisoned South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela.

The year 1981, with Mandela serving a life sentence at the Robben Island prison, not only saw South African expatriate Hexham meet Mandela's former wife, Winnie, but also marked the year Hexham's family experienced the ultimate mark of a bond by passing baby clothes on to Mandela's family.

"Nelson Mandela's first grandchild wore clothes that my sister wore first," said Hexham, recalling a family connection to Mandela that started with his grandmother, Mary 'Maimie' Corrigan — a lifelong anti-apartheid activist in South Africa.

Mandela died Thursday aged 95. South Africa's first black president had been in poor health in recent months and was in and out of hospital with chronic lung problems. He passed away peacefully at his home in Johannesburg, surrounded by family.

Mandela emerged as an icon of the 20th century, leading his country out of a racist apartheid regime, averting civil war, and establishing an inclusive democracy. All while embracing a society that had jailed him for 27 years in a supreme act of forgiveness.

Hexham “grew up hearing the stories of people who fought in the anti-apartheid battle”, and learned of his grandmother’s own links with Winnie Mandela.

Winnie, who lived under strict guard during her then-husband’s incarceration, was suddenly relocated by South African police in 1979.

“This outraged my grandmother so much she wrote to Winnie,” Hexham said.

“At the time no one knew where Winnie was so she wrote it via the special branch of the South African police service. To everyone’s shock, they actually delivered it.”

So began a two-year correspondence between the women, and an unlikely family connection.

In one letter Hexham’s grandmother asked Winnie if she needed anything after the abrupt move.

“She said ‘I need everything’. Their first grandchild had just been born,” said Hexham. “My sister was six months old at the time so my mother sent all of my sister’s baby’s clothing to my grandmother who forwarded it on to Winnie.”

Hexham’s grandmother died in 1981 and never got to meet the champion of the anti-apartheid cause she fought for, or see him released from prison to unify the nation.

However, an extract from the 1990 Mandela biography *Higher Than Hope* noted the esteem in which South Africa’s first black president held Hexham’s grandmother.

In a September 1979 letter from prison to Winnie, Mandela wrote: “It pleases me to know that people as far as Pietermaritzburg have visited you. Apparently Doctor Briggs is a well-known orthopedic surgeon in the city and his wife and Mrs Corrigan. All familiar names in that province and beyond. Give them a big hug on my behalf when you meet them again.”

Alberta Premier Alison Redford — who worked with Mandela in the early 1990s — said Thursday the world was a better place because of the work of the former president of South Africa.

Redford served as part of a team that helped rebuild the county’s legal system as it moved out of apartheid — an effort Mandela’s political opponents, black and white, often tried to derail with escalating acts of violence.

“He would continually bring people back to the table,” said Redford. “That was his greatest strength.”

Don Ray spent several years of his childhood in South Africa, working the circus circuit with his parents in the 1950s and 1960s during the height of apartheid tension.

The government went to “absurd lengths” to enforce the rules of the regime, Ray said.

“It was like a corrosive acid that ate into all social relations,” said Ray, now a political science professor at the University of Calgary, specializing in South African politics. “Every relation that you could think of was affected. It was just horrible.”

Ray left South Africa when he was 13, returning 34 years later in 1997, three years after Mandela won

the presidency.

“It was wonderful to go all over the place and seeing people expecting to be treated equally,” he said.

Mandela faced the difficult task of dismantling systemic racism and rebuilding a country scarred by decades of race-fuelled violence — and his own imprisonment — without lashing out at white South Africans.

“When you think of how terribly, wickedly the white apartheid regime had treated blacks in South Africa you could have forgiven Mandela if he reacted in the spirit of revenge,” said Ray. “But he didn’t. He said white or black you are all part of South Africa and we have to go forward.”

Mandela’s focus on reconciliation over revenge has emerged as among his key legacies and was cited by Calgarians who gathered at a Calgary theatre Thursday evening to attend a special screening of the biopic *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. The show had been booked weeks in advance, making its timing a case of pure happenstance.

“Mandela is my hero,” Yumba Matipa, a Calgarian born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, said before he took his seat, “because he fought for equality for the white man and the black man.”

Earlier Thursday, Beatrix Downton had asked her 15-year-old daughter Zoe how much she knew about the man. When the young girl replied she knew very little, the mother thought “that needs to change,” and they headed for the theatre.

Asked what she wants her daughter to learn, Downton said, “One of the things that’s most impressive is how he dealt with the situation coming out of prison without feeling revenge.

“He helped his country and didn’t fall into those traps and he put the past in the proper perspective without lingering feelings of guilt and shame and accusations.”

Taylor Ross, who lived in South Africa on an exchange program as a university student and immersed herself in the country’s history and culture, choked up with tears when she spoke of how she feels about Mandela’s death.

“It’s so sad,” she said, trembling, in the theatre lineup. “He was a very important man and you just hope that more important people will come out to do the things he did.”

Elsewhere, Calgarians with South African ties reflected on Mandela’s legacy.

Mark Pawley, owner of SA Meat Shops in Kensington, served as a policeman (military service became mandatory for young, white South African men in 1967) in Johannesburg in the 1980s.

“Strangely, Nelson Mandela wasn’t really a name that we were familiar with,” said Pawley. “There was a government blanket ban on the use of his name and image. It was this mythical name that was out there.”

Mandela’s 1990 release from prison shocked many people in the country, said Pawley.

He didn’t vote for Mandela when his African National Congress Party won the country’s historic 1994

election, but remembers the man fondly now: "He was a man that was tolerant, he didn't hold a vendetta."

Despite his successes, Mandela leaves behind a country that may still struggle for "decades, generations" to recover from its apartheid past, Pawley said.

"If we don't get future leaders that are cut from the same cloth as Nelson Mandela, I'm not so sure South Africa's future would be all that rosy. We certainly need people of his stature."

—With files from James Wood, Calgary Herald and Mariam Ibrahim, Edmonton Journal

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