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BROCK'S BANTER: Mandela & The Children

By Brock Weir

It almost seemed like the world paused for a second or two as we got home from work or school on Thursday, flipped on the TV, only to find wall-to-wall coverage of Nelson Mandela's death.

Sadness is understandable following the death of anyone, but despite his being in rapidly deteriorating health for the better part of 2013, there was something shocking and final about the loss of a figure so pivotal to the history of the 20th century.

As I am writing this with the news little more than an hour old, images are being beamed over from Johannesburg and Pretoria of South Africans gathering with flags, flowers, and candles, and the Presidential Seal is being adjusted at the White House, waiting for a televised statement that will be beamed around the world.

As people remember, I wonder how many people in my age bracket around here had their minds cast back to one very memorable Toronto day in the fall of 1998, being among the tens of thousands of Ontario students and teachers filling the Skydome, all sharing in a once-in-a-lifetime feeling of electricity.

Early in that school year, we students at Newmarket's Stonehaven Elementary School received word that there just might be a possibility that a few of us would be able to be a part of the Nelson Mandela & The Children rally in Toronto.

We didn't care much about the political purposes of his trip, but the fact this ?superstar? was taking time out of his schedule to share a morning with students sparked more than a little imagination among us.

In all honesty, I can't fully remember the criteria of our students being chosen as one of the hundreds represented that remarkable day, but we forged ahead. We lay the groundwork for the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund within our school, adopted a laundry list of charitable endeavours that we could do to fulfil its mandate, and did our utmost to raise awareness within the community of ?the cause.?

Even then, however, there was no guarantee at the time that our group would be able to attend and, if our group was, whether all members would be able to make the trip. Putting our heads together, however, we had something of an ?in.? After all, the teacher leading the group was a South African émigré named Ryan Freidman who, it seemed, had pretty good connections in his native land through his athletic prowess. Or so we surmised.

With that in mind, looking back it is almost laughable the extent to which some of us went to keep in Mr. Friedman's good books in order to secure our spots. It might have been a bit over the top but, hey, we knew this was going to be a once in a lifetime opportunity and we were damned if we were going to miss it.

Just days before the event, we finally got the thumbs-up. I'm not going to speak for my group, but I was personally elated that we would be in the same room ? even if the room in question could fit a few thousand regulation-sized classrooms ? as a person of such greatness.

And he didn't disappoint.

We were up on our feet as the determined looking woman in the red suit drove President Mandela and his wife, Graça Machel, onto the field in a rather ordinary golf cart through the hordes of children to the podium below the Jumbotron while cultural displays unfolded on the stage.

Perhaps we might not have been the most orderly bunch ? a certain infamous booing of Premier Mike Harris when he took to the dais comes to mind ? but when President Mandela approached the podium to deliver his simple, yet powerfully delivered message, you could almost hear a pin drop. And that was certainly no mean feat for a stadium packed with approximately 50,000 kids.

There, he formally launched his Nelson Mandela Children's fund in Canada and had a reciprocal message for the Canadian children lending a hand and the children benefiting from the fund.

?It has been said that the youth, the children, are the most important asset of our society,? said President Mandela. ?To find that young people are so sensitive to come to the help of their young friends in South Africa shows that the people of Canada are on their feet to be counted in fighting all forms of injustice.?

It was a plain, yet stirring message, for those of us who were using our feet just a few moments previously to deliver a message about the Common Sense revolution which, over 15 years on, was mortifyingly inappropriate for the occasion. His words got right to the point and had a lasting impact.

?When I go back to my country, I will be able to tell the children of South Africa that in Canada they have friends indeed who are ready to work with us for a better life for all children ? and I would like to tell the Canadian children who are not with us that we love each and every one of them,? he concluded.

That love was certainly returned from all quarters that memorable morning and as the world mourns, I keep reliving that certain unique feeling many of us had the great fortune of experiencing, have longed to re-experience it, and now, sadly, know all too well we will never feel it again.
It was a fleeting moment, a moment which, from the 500 level of the SkyDome, could really only be taken in with binoculars, but a towering moment nonetheless.