

## An Aurora tribute to the "Lion of Africa"



**By Brock Weir**

It had been a day she dreaded and prepared for over much of this year, but when the moment finally came on Thursday evening, the news of Nelson Mandela's death was no less shocking to Aurora's Mae Khamissa.

While getting some last minute groceries that evening, Ms. Khamissa got the call from her daughter. Describing her reaction as one of "shock" and "disbelief", she admits she made "a bit of an ass" of herself as people approached her to make sure she was okay. She describes the scene with a bit of a chuckle in hindsight, but the news conjured up many memories of growing up in South Africa at the height of Apartheid.

"This man was our hope," she says. "He was the father of our nation and he gave us so much encouragement and hope."

Ms. Khamissa and her husband, Raz, are the owners of Aurora's Omar's Shoes. In the days after Mr. Mandela's death, they set up a makeshift tribute to the iconic leader in their storefront, featuring photographs, flags and memorabilia from his visits to Canada. But behind the photos and t-shirts is a very human story, one shared by South African expatriates the world-over.

Ms. Khamissa, whose family settled in South Africa from India, was one of 10 children. Her family lived near South Africa's border with Botswana until the late 1950s when they were evicted by the authorities. Many years later, she recalls the trauma of the segregation that was imposed on them.

"We had a beautiful home my father had built, we had great relationships with the local Africans there. My family had to gather what they could but we lost everything we had."

They were settled on the outskirts of Johannesburg in a small township specifically reserved for people of South Asian descent. This is the environment in which she was born in the early 1960s. She was just a small child when Mr. Mandela was in the first days of his 27 year imprisonment. Although the mere mention of his name was almost taboo under the strict eye of authorities and educators, the young Mae soon began to hear stories of a "great man who had given up everything."

"During my teen years, I didn't know exactly what he looked like because the government had a ban on any literature to do with Nelson Mandela," she says. "Then, in 1979, the ANC (African National Congress) youth movement started spreading in the schools and word started getting around."

"We were frustrated with the facilities we grew up with. Our school was filled with asbestos, our textbooks were handed down older textbooks from white schools, some of them had missing pages, but we had to make do. We were tired with the poor education. When we heard about this great leader who gave up everything, his family, to fight for his fellow South Africans, that momentum just dove into our hearts and we wanted better."

It wasn't mere sentiment. These teens struck out to do something about it. Eventually they organized themselves so that one day at the stroke of noon, the students would simply stand up in the middle of a lesson and walk out of the school. This turned into a six month boycott of the school.

‘We would get locked up in school as it wasn't a school where you could just walk in. There were fences and barbed wire. When you went in in the morning they would lock the gates up so students couldn't leave. On several occasions, the police would come in with their riot squad trucks and we would get a good whacking. That happened to me once. Other times we had a decent principal who would open the gates and we would run away.’

The momentum continued for Mae and her family. An elder brother fled to Canada in the 1960s to become a physician as there was a strict quota on ‘non-white’ doctors under Apartheid. He was joined by the rest of his family in 1982. In Canada, Mae quickly got involved with a chapter of the ANC in Canada, now in the full knowledge of ‘Madiba’ and his goals.

As a high school student, she would head down to The Danforth on the weekends to volunteer, send out mailers and literature, organizing people who had been exiled from the country and generally spreading the word. Her efforts extended into the group Canadians Concerned with Southern Africa who marched among the public to make people aware of Apartheid and press Canada to stand by boycotts of South African products.

‘But there was always this dream of this great man someday being released,’ she says.

When that day finally came in 1990, there was no place Mae and Raz wanted to be more than back on The Danforth with people who had advocated so hard from so far away.

‘I can't even describe the emotion and the feeling of thousands of people walking up and down the street in celebration, the tears, the cheers, and the happiness,’ she recalls. ‘While being here and helping out at the ANC on the Danforth, meeting all those people in exile, now they could finally go back home, some of them after 40 years, and they could see their parents and their families. It was a dream come true.’

Guiding this new phase for her homeland was Mandela himself. Hailing him for his ‘humble’ nature, but also his ‘strength’ and ability to apply his strength as a statesman, she made her first trip back to her homeland shortly after subsequent elections placed him as president. She says she returned to a very different society than the one she had fled with her family two decades before.

‘There was no doubt in what he wanted,’ she says. ‘His vision was having all South African people come and stand together, and that is what I saw. There was such a difference when I went back. I could now go into a public washroom in Johannesburg when I needed to. I could go to a restaurant and sit down and eat if I needed to. I could go and stand in line at a grocery store and not worry [about] having to let a person of white colour go ahead of me. I could go on any bus I chose to. I could sit on a bench in the park. It was unbelievable.’

On the same trip, revisiting the town of her childhood, word spread the president was due to make a visit and there was no stopping her.

‘It was mind blowing,’ she said.

‘Every human being should have the quality of humility, the dignity of love that he gave and showed his people, and the people around the world,’ says Ms. Khamissa.

As The Auroran went to press on Tuesday, Ms. Khamissa was due to embark on another trip back to South Africa, this time to Pretoria to pay her final respects directly to the Lion of Africa himself, ahead of his burial