

## CHANCE MEETING WITH NELSON MANDELA CHANGED LIFE

It was Oct. 7, 1990 shortly after Mandela had been released from prison. I was teaching in downtown Johannesburg at a private street college called Centurion Academy. It was mainly for blacks from Soweto trying to escape being a victim of the youth "lost generation". I had attended a funeral in Soweto that Sunday for a student of mine (Student Council President) who had committed suicide after being called-out by the white administration for wanting some student rights.

I was returning home early that evening in my aging, air-cooled VW beetle to Saxonwold, a suburb of Johannesburg. I started to turn off the freeway at my normal exit and found I had, somehow, overshot the exit. I thought I must have been day-dreaming or half asleep so drove to the next (and last) exit to go home. More alert by now, the steering wheel refused to turn and I continued to go straight. It was at this moment I felt something strange come over me – something taking control of me – which compelled me to just keep going down the road in the direction of the International Airport.

I traveled about 15 kilometers or so before turning off at the airport exit and stopping at a Holiday Inn. It wasn't that I was lost or anything, but, rather that I now seemed to have a purpose or reason for being there. I asked the receptionist at the Holiday Inn if anything was going on and she said, "No, everyone is at the World Trade Centre at the Willie Ramashaba dinner". My "bug" found the Trade Centre easily where it was all dark and void of cars. I turned to leave the parking lot and go home when my "bug" completely took over and drove me to the opposite end of the Trade Centre where it plopped down and stopped in the middle of some cars tucked away in a corner.

Any control I felt previously had now completely vanished! I was being directed by an ever stronger "force". I went to a set of entrance doors and found them unlocked. I entered with only dim night lights exposing the rotunda. I traversed along the shadows until I temporarily came to my senses to know I shouldn't be there in the first place. Being arrested seemed a likely proposition. I pushed the next set of doors to exit when I distinctly heard the voice of Nelson Mandela. I stopped in my tracks. It was a radio, I was sure, from the night watchmen. Should I leave or return to the voice I heard? I had no choice – the "force" had already made the decision for me. I walked along the rotunda until I saw two Afrikaans guards sitting outside an open door smoking cigarettes. Mandela was in there!

I was in a coat and tie and had my US passport with me. I showed it to the guards and told them I was late for the meeting. They let me in, without hesitation. Mandela was on a lighted stage with the rest of the room pitch black. I slithered along the nearest wall until I found an empty folding chair and quickly sat down. When the lights came on, I was 15 feet from the head table of Nelson and Winnie Mandela and sitting in the middle of his ragtag security team along the wall. It was like Nelson Mandela, himself, was beckoning me to join him. He had something for me. Acting instinctively, I opened my passport and asked the guard next to me if he could get an autograph. The next thing I knew Mandela's guard motioned me over to Nelson and Winnie's table. Was it destiny or the fact I was the only American in the house? Most Americans had gone home because of apartheid related sanctions. I wanted to believe it was because of me. Before other guests swarmed Mandela's table after desert (ice cream w/ chocolate syrup) Nelson and I carried on a short, 3-4 minute conversation.

I nervously spoke first and apologized to Mandela as he wrote in my passport. I said, "I am not with this group but came from a funeral in Soweto". He countered with raised eyebrows saying, "You went to Soweto? that's goood....". I then explained the circumstances of the funeral and he extended his and Winnie's condolences which I wrote down as best I could immediately after leaving the building. A bond had been formed with a person who had just been released from 27 ½ years in prison! We had talked to each other in the most cordial way and Mandela had listened to me attentively – a trait he would become well known for later. At the time, however, I thought it may have simply been curiosity at my unorthodox approach that made Mandela call me forward. Whatever the case, I am forever grateful that it happened – an uninvited, foreign stranger talking to the most famous person in the world.

After that, I was totally mesmerized by anything Mandela as he made his run for the Presidency. I followed his every move on TV and in the print media. I was also fearful for his lack of security precautions as he flitted about the countryside campaigning and speaking. It was particularly stressful when Chris Hani, head of the Communist Party and presumptive running mate of Mandela, was murdered in 1993 by a white supremacist. I remember clearly traveling home on the M1 South past the soccer stadium next to Soweto to Walkerville in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg and seeing homes burning and mobs running through the fields killing white people. A State of Emergency was called by the apartheid government. But, at no time during these tumultuous episodes did I feel that my earlier encounter with Mandela was without meaning or purpose. I was hopeful and waiting for another tug or signal from Mandela to give me direction. It was not up to me but up to him to make this gesture as I was merely a guest in his country. Looking back, however, I believe Mandela may have first picked up vibes from me in 1987 while he was in prison and I scaled a tower in Miami protesting treatment of the poor and high school students in Dade County. With Mandela locked away in prison and my divorce, it is possible we connected somehow in the netherworld.

Mandela knocked on my door again in April 1994, shortly after his election as new President of South Africa. Beforehand, I believe Mandela intentionally put me to work as a volunteer for Hospice of the Witwatersrand in Houghton, located a few blocks from where he would eventually live. This work came about after radicals took over a new 5-story school in the Johannesburg CBD I had opened called *CENTURY 21* – a former *DAMLEIN* educational facility. With Hospice, I made twice-weekly trips to Mofolo South, Soweto under police escort where, one time, my guards mentioned the discovery of a hi-jacked truck full of ballots headed to polling stations before the election. I perked up and checked with the IEC headquarters across from the Carlton Centre in Johannesburg. The Director running the election denied knowledge of any missing ballots. On a second or third trip to the IEC, I picked up a press pass from the desk of a temporarily absent receptionist and entered a secure back area. Two young men working there knew about the ballots and told me the advertising agency was in control of the recovered ballots. Two trips to the ad agency were unrewarded except for the secretary mentioning a meeting about the ballots currently taking place with a man from the East Rand Home Affairs who left the office as I sat in reception. My next trip to the IEC, the Director told me, "we only run the election, Home Affairs owns the ballot papers from the election. You need to see them". This was after a piece in *THE STAR* newspaper ran about the hi-jacking.

It seemed only right that my bond with Mandela should not be one-dimensional. I, too, had to take some responsibility for the relationship. This would come to pass soon enough. That's why I believe Mandela tapped me, an American, with whom to partner. He would most certainly have given his black fellow countrymen first choice but they had no money. White counterparts in South Africa had the money but little interest in anything Mandela. Mandela was well aware of this situation. Therefore, it was up to me to "close the deal" Mandela had so elegantly set the table for. All that was necessary was the \$million dollars to fund the purchase.

This was easier said than done. I felt the pressure right away. Little did I know in the beginning there was an inside deal working to divert the hi-jacked ballots to America for personal gain. That is why my repeated trips to the IEC, the advertising agency of the IEC and The Department of Home Affairs for information all seemed to be in vain. Luckily, the people involved in attempting to divert the ballots apparently got cold feet from my incessant prying. Being an American at this particular time in history carried great weight in South Africa. The Transitional Government was in charge and the transfer of power from the National Party to the ANC was starting. No one in the government wanted to take too many chances (or jail) regarding their futures with the new government right around the corner. It seemed I was the one, big thorn in their sides. I had worked my inquiries all the way up to the Tender Board where the ballots reached their final destination – government auction. Along the path of the ballots, from the velt to a government auction, I had apparently ruffled too many feathers. The treasury of the South African Government would be the beneficiary once I paid for the ballots.

The Tender Board gazetted the ballots legally but without fanfare – it was nicely disguised in fine print. There was still a chance for the perpetrators to pull off their caper with low bids through a proxy or third party. I, however, now had direct contact with the Tender Board so knew exactly when and how to fill out the documents and where to submit them. I was an obvious real person with bono fide American credentials whose bid would not be discarded. When I bid and won 95% of ballots, the Tender Board informed me I could not sell them in the United States. That's when I went to the newspapers and complained. Two reporters for the two biggest Afrikaans newspapers in the country uncovered the scam when people in various departments started squealing to save their own necks. Before this, however, I had had a big shouting match with the Director of Home Affairs in Pretoria (with my attorney) where I threatened to walk over to the US Embassy a few blocks away (a brand new, beautiful monolith) and complain to the U.S. Ambassador. At this point, the Director left the room and returned to tell me there were no restrictions and I could sell anywhere in the world.

The rest is history. With investors in the US, I sold several hundred thousand ballots from 1994 through the 1995 World Cup in South Africa using Hawker and Taxi Associations, plus, many NGO's. The balance was then shipped and stored in the USA in bonded storage. Now, with Mandela's recent passing, it seems likely an auction or finding a joint-venture partner will be the next order of business. If auctioned, the date preferred by *AFRIDOM* will be Nelson Mandela International Day, July 18, 2014. This will be the first anniversary since Mandela's death with many global remembrances anticipated.