

Students of Bishan Park Secondary School  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Today, we commemorate the life of Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected President of South Africa, and whose vision and actions inspired the creation of South Africa from the ashes of violence and racism.

As Nelson Mandela himself noted, in 1994, after years of racial conflict:

*"We were expected to destroy one another and ourselves collectively in the worst racial conflagration. Instead, we as a people chose the path of negotiation, compromise and peaceful settlement. Instead of hatred and revenge we chose reconciliation and nation-building."*

Nelson Mandela's life has become an inspiration to uncountable millions throughout the world, as a leader who guided South Africa from racism, division and violence to the miracle of what became known as the "rainbow nation" of South Africa. I have been asked to give you some insight into the life of this South African national icon, our beloved Madiba.

Rolihlahla Mandela was born in 1918. He attended primary school in Qunu where he was given the name "Nelson" in accordance with the custom of giving all schoolchildren "Christian" names. It is as a sign of deep respect that South Africans refer to Nelson Mandela as Madiba, his Xhosa clan name. Madiba matriculated from Healdtown, a Wesleyan secondary school, where he excelled in boxing, athletics and academics. Madiba completed his BA and graduated 1943. Madiba joined the African National Congress in 1944, where he was instrumental in forming the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). In 1952 Madiba was chosen as the National Volunteer-in-Chief of the Defiance Campaign. This was a massive country wide campaign of civil disobedience against six particularly unjust laws. Madiba and 19 others were charged under the Suppression of Communism Act for their part in the campaign and sentenced to nine months hard labour. After this, Madiba was not permitted to participate in political activities. However, he attended when the Freedom Charter, the basic guiding document for the liberation of South Africa, was adopted in 1955.

Madiba was arrested again in 1955 and arraigned during the 1956 Treason Trial. Men and women of all races found themselves in the dock in the lengthy trial that ended in 1961 with the acquittal of all the accused.

On 21 March 1960, police killed 69 unarmed people in a protest against discriminatory ("pass") laws in Sharpeville. This led to the banning of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Mandela went underground and began planning a national strike to focus attention on the iniquities of apartheid. The strike was unsuccessful as the security forces violently intervened. In June 1961, Madiba was asked to lead an armed struggle and established the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (Spear of the Nation), which launched its armed attacks in 1961 with a series of explosions. In January 1962, Madiba secretly left South Africa. He travelled around Africa and visited England to gain support for the armed struggle. He received military training in Morocco and Ethiopia and returned to South Africa in mid-1962. Madiba was arrested in a police roadblock while returning from KwaZulu-Natal. He was charged with leaving the country without a permit and inciting workers to strike. He was convicted and sentenced to five years' imprisonment. On a raid at Liliesleaf, a secret hide-out used by ANC and Communist Party activists, several of Madiba's comrades were arrested. In 1963 Madiba joined 10 others on trial for sabotage in what became known as the Rivonia Trial. While facing the death penalty, his words to the court at the end of his famous "Speech from the Dock" on

20 April 1964 became immortalised:

*"I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."*

In June 1964 Mandela and seven other accused (Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Denis Goldberg, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni) were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Goldberg was sent to Pretoria Prison because he was white, while the others went to Robben Island. Madiba spent 18 of his 27 years in prison at the Robben Island Prison.

After many years and international sanctions against South Africa, the apartheid Government agreed to talks about democratisation. Madiba was released on Sunday, 11 February 1990, nine days after the unbanning of the ANC and the PAC. Mandela immersed himself in the official negotiations to end white minority rule, and in 1991 was elected ANC President. In 1993, Madiba and President FW de Klerk jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize, and following an agreement on the democratisation of South Africa, on 27 April 1994 Madiba voted for the first time in his life. Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first democratically elected President. Improving race relations and building a new united, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa was President Mandela's aim. Madiba formed a multiracial "Government of National Unity" and proclaimed the country a "rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world." Madiba stepped down in 1999 after one term as President. He continued to work with the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund he set up in 1995 and established the Nelson Mandela Foundation and The Mandela Rhodes Foundation. Nelson Mandela never wavered in his devotion to democracy, equality, racial harmony and learning. He never answered racism with racism. Madiba's life is an inspiration to all who are oppressed and deprived; and to all who are opposed to oppression, racial tension, violence and deprivation. Madiba said:

*"Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish, regardless of race, colour, creed, religion, gender, class, caste, or any other social markers of difference. Religion, ethnicity, language, social and cultural practices are elements which enrich human civilization, adding to the wealth of our diversity. Why should they be allowed to become a cause of division, and violence? We demean our common humanity by allowing that to happen."*

He died at his home in Johannesburg on 5 December 2013. South Africans were devastated at the passing of Madiba, one of the world's great statesmen. We continue to celebrate Madiba's life and example through Mandela Day, now an international day adopted by the United Nations Organisation. On this day, we seek to emulate his example by engaging with our communities, helping those less fortunate, building racial acceptance and harmony, and generally giving back to society. Madiba spent 67 years of his life serving the global community, and he has exhorted us to spend at least 67 minutes on this day doing the same. We hope that this event, coming as it does before Racial Harmony Day and National Day, will motivate us all to do our best for our communities.

Thank you.