

# Documenting the life of a legendary man

**By Avonie Brown**  
*Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
 During my lifetime I have dedicated my life to the struggle of the African people. 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 with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and see realized. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

—Nelson Mandela

He was born in 1918, one of nine children, to royal Xhosa lineage. After his father's death he was brought up by Chief David Jongintaba Dalindyebo. He was expected and therefore trained to be a chief advisor to the tribal king. However, he fled from Chief Dalindyebo rather than go through with an arranged marriage. He was 23 and he was alone and broke.

Even as a child his sister said she knew he was destined for greatness and he was highly valued by those around him.

"I looked at the kind of work he was doing. I realized he isn't ours...He belongs to the nation. He has given up my brother because we see from his nature (that) he was meant to embrace the whole nation...We can see that this is the job God gave him, so we must support him, pray for him, and ask God to protect him from his enemies."

At birth he was named Rolihlanhla Dalibunga Madiba Mandela but because a teacher disapproved of his African name he was given the name Nelson. To the world he is simply known as Nelson Mandela. But the life of the man has been anything but simple. For 27 years, while imprisoned on Robben Island on a life sentence for high treason, Nelson Mandela was like a mythical figure for many fighting on the anti-apartheid front. He became synonymous with the struggle for democracy in South Africa. He is the son of Africa, the father of a nation.

Recognizing the worldwide significance of Mandela's continuing political progression, South African filmmaker Jo Menell, initially "astonished that no one was making a film about (Mandela)" was able to convince him to authorize the project. And their production, the Academy Award-nominated Mandela, comprehensively documents the life of the man not the icon. "We've kept the political story simple but true to reality, and used lots of South African music to create a large scale portrait of a man and his country," he said.

Co-director Angus Gibson, a South African documentary filmmaker, said, "Although Mandela's life has been defined by the struggle for liberation, this is not a political film; it is a film about a man."

Zindzi Mandela-Hlongwane, the youngest of Mandela's adult children concurs that the film was made because Menell and Gibson simply asked. "It was a spontaneous thing. No one had asked before so when Menell and Gibson approached Madiba he agreed. He agreed because they were interested in capturing Mandela the man not the myth," she said in an interview with NNPA. Mandela-Hlongwane was in New York and later Los Angeles, to represent her father at the U.S. premieres of the documentary.

While some have questioned Mandela's decision to allow two white South Africans to do the documentary, Mandela-Hlongwane said that it is consistent with her father's willingness to work with anyone to carry out his agenda. "What they must realize is that my father is a champion of reconciliation. Even as a member of the African Nation Congress (ANC) he believed that in view of what he was trying to achieve (fundamental rights and freedom for Black South Africans), color was completely immaterial."

On the other hand, it has also been suggested that at this critical time of political transition in South Africa, the documentary is both timely and courageous. "It amazes and surprises him about the stature and the perceptions people have of him nationally and internationally. That is why there are these very human encounters like seeing him shave and discussing his wardrobe with his assistant," said Mandela-Hlongwane.

Indeed the filmmakers paint an intimate portrait of a legendary man whose quiet dignity and revolutionary commitment galvanized communities internationally like no other issue has been able to. The documentary is as familiar as the medium will allow with Mandela narrating much of the film. Mandela authorized the film crew to invade his personal moments and we are allowed to experience his humor, the simplicity of his morning routine, and his visits to significant locales like his ancestral grave site, his childhood boarding school and his cell at Robben Island.

The film also weaves in incredible archival footage that firmly places the whole experience in its historic

context. From them we get brief glimpses of the political process, with an interview with Mandela while he is in hiding through to his negotiations with F.W. de Klerk South Africa's president (1989-1994) and ultimately his successful campaign and inauguration as South Africa's first democratically elected president.

The filmmakers augment Mandela's narrative with brief commentary from some of the key people in his life—his family as well as political allies and observers of the political climate. All share a common

theme, they each recognized that tantamount to Mandela's life was his commitment to the political freedom of Black South Africa. Mandela-Hlongwane said that deciding who to include and exclude was a difficult process. "A conscious decision was made to focus on Mandela and that was difficult enough. They had to edit over 400 hours down to the 1-1/2 hour you see," she said.

"I was concerned even about that because I wasn't sure if I wanted to sit and watch a documentary about my father, I thought maybe I would be

bored, what could be new? But I was surprised that it showed me something new about him. I enjoyed it in fact. You can never get enough, never know everything you need to know about a person," she added.

But even this story is incomplete because as Mandela-Hlongwane pointed out, Mandela has indicated that after 1999 he will step down from the presidency and go into farming, spoil his grandchildren and write his memoirs of his presidency. "We also have our stories to tell but there is so much to be done and so little time."

In fact the impact of the apartheid struggle on Mandela's children is another of the untold stories.

"I did not have a father," said Mandela-Hlongwane. "He was always active and sacrificed us for the nation."

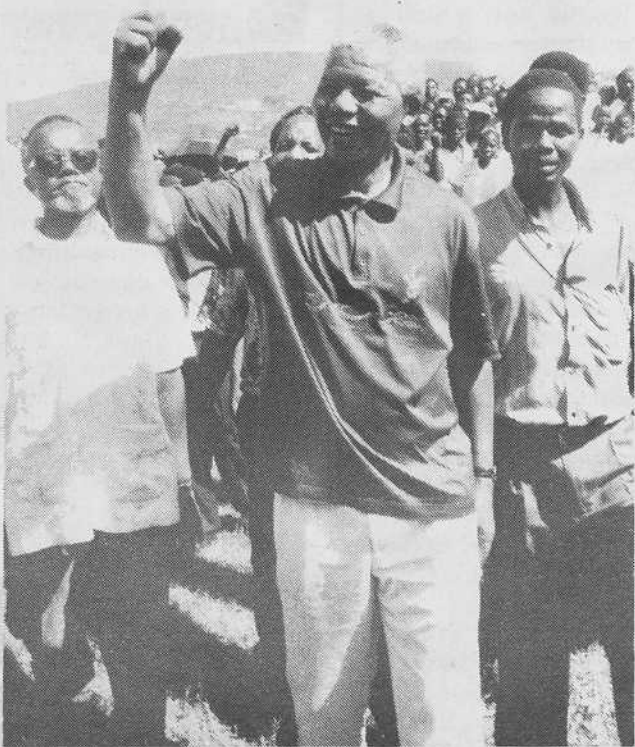
"(But) when I was feeling resentful I got my strength and internal survival from my mother (Winnie Mandela). She helped me realize what it all really meant and the importance of selfless giving. And with my two parents, boy, do I have a set of values to pass on to my children," she said with pride.

While Mandela-Hlongwane is very aware of the struggles and intense scrutiny her family has endured, she is also very sensitive to the advantages she and her siblings have had compared to the families of other political prisoners. "The film is really to benefit and acknowledge the many people who worked with my father,

he couldn't have done it alone. Many of them are now unable to earn a little money or provide comfort for their family. We have to find ways to assist and to say thank you," she said emotionally.

She also outlined that part of the joyful dilemma she is now experiencing is her father's need to play the role of father. As the youngest she sees his attempts to try and continue where he left off. But after 27 years in prison, he returns to a family of grown children with families of their own. So his focus has turned to his grandchildren. "As a grandfather he spoils our children by doing things we all are not able to match. But we realize that he needs this because it helps him to remove so much of the guilt. He has said, 'Through my grandchildren I now am able to father my children,'" she said.

The intensity of international focus on South Africa has waned since Mandela's release from prison and his election to the presidency. Mandela-Hlongwane confirmed that this film is one attempt to refocus our attention. "To quote Madiba, 'The inauguration was when the real struggle began.' The problems facing the millions of South Africans is still in place, it has not disappeared. Crime, homeless, as well as problems in the health and education sectors need the active assistance of the international world. There still has to be shared interest in the welfare of South Africa," she emphasized.



South African President Nelson Mandela, shown here during a March 1993 visit to violence-torn Natal Province.

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