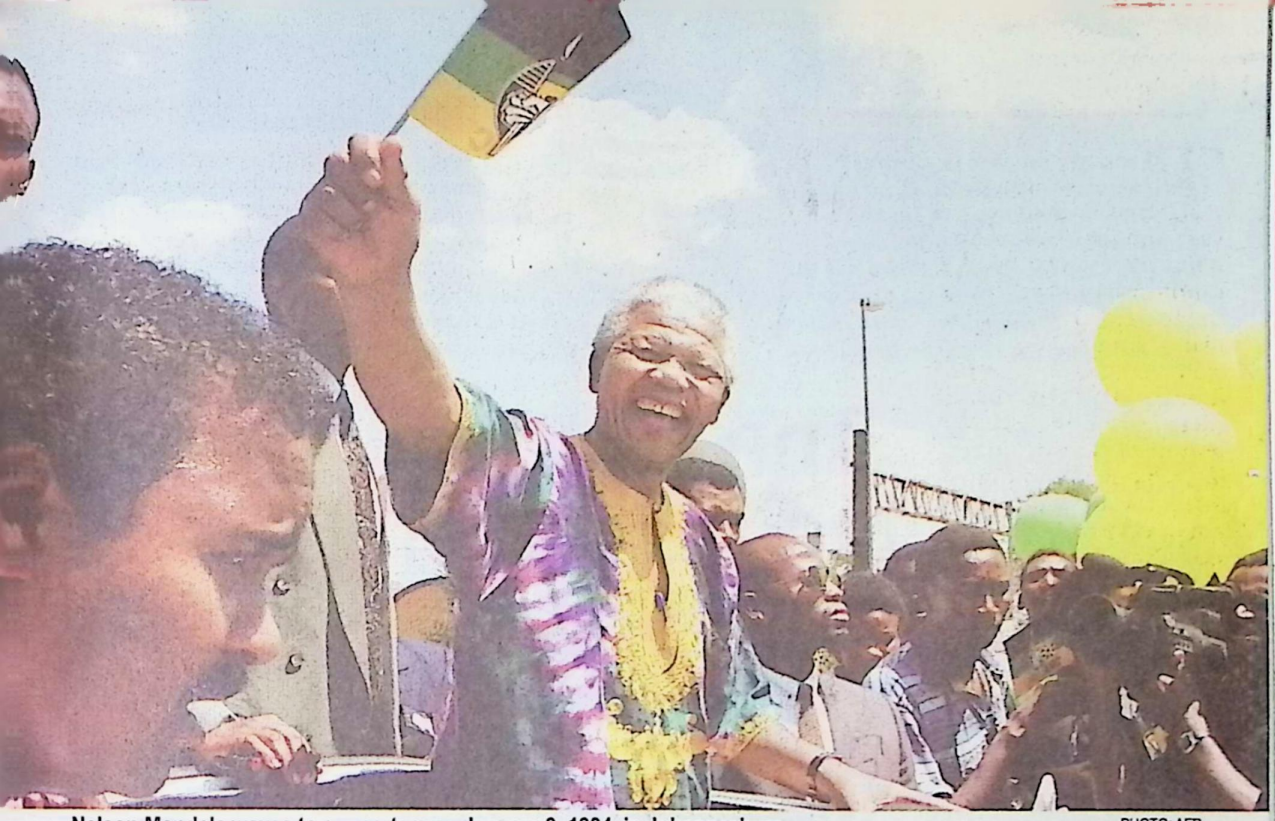


Nelson Mandela waves to supporters on January 9, 1994, in Johannesburg. PHOTO: AFP

Credit has to be given to President F W De Clerk who was instrumental in the release of Mandela and subsequently the ending of apartheid in South Africa.

Over the next few years, amidst ongoing tension and sporadic violence within the country, Mandela spent his time and efforts pushing for the first multiracial elections in South Africa. Unsurprisingly in 1993, Mandela, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize which he shared with Mr de Klerk.

The following year all his hard work and determination came to fruition and Mandela was elected South Africa's first black president. His detractors must have been gutted to see the ex prisoner become the president right before their eyes. Despite having not just South Africa but most of the world hanging on his every word he did not cash in on his popularity and served only a single term from 1994 till he stepped down in 1999.

Even after retirement Mandela was not one to sit idly and travelled extensively; working tirelessly on various Human Rights projects and became an increasingly outspoken advocate for the need to tackle the HIV/Aids epidemic in Africa. Gradually he reduced the number of public appearances he made and preferred to remain in South Africa especially once his health began to fail him.

A few years ago when my youngest daughter was ten or eleven, she was asked to do a school project on someone inspirational. She chose Nelson Mandela. She trawled the internet to get as much information as she could glean from various articles, took out books on Mandela and read his autobiography "Long Road to Freedom" before I did! When I asked her what had made her choose Mandela she told me that 'Madiba' as he was affectionately referred to had changed the way people view others and taught us that race, colour and religion didn't make us different from one another. I couldn't have agreed more. Nelson Mandela was an inspiration to millions of people of all ages, races and religions around the world and his legacy is one that will live on for generations to come.

Although Mandela was known for his indomitable spirit and courage, his exceptional leadership qualities and for being a fearless freedom fighter, I would like to remember him as a real living breathing human being with hopes, dreams, fears and desires just like the rest of us. And how can anyone forget his delightfully mischievous sense of humour. After announcing his 'retirement from retirement' in a 2004 interview, he told the world 'Don't call me – I will call you.'

For most people, spending almost three decades in prison would have broken their spirit or fostered feelings of negativity and hate towards those who had done him this unforgivable injustice. Instead, he spent his life teaching others the value of compassion, forgiveness and courage. In his autobiography 'Long Walk to Freedom', Nelson Mandela writes *"No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."*