

## RETROSPECTIVE

# Nelson R. Mandela (1918–2013)

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When Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela died on 5 December, the world lost one of its greatest leaders. Lawyer. Protester. Revolutionary. Anti-apartheid leader. Prisoner. Negotiator. President. Statesman. Anti-AIDS campaigner. Philanthropist. These 10 stages of his life capture his historic long walk to freedom and his legacy as a great humanitarian.

Born on 18 July 1918 in the rural Thembu village of Mveso in Transkei, South Africa, Mandela was named Rolihlahla, which in Xhosa means “tugging a tree branch.” He was given the Christian name “Nelson” on his first day at a local missionary school in Qunu. At the age of 21, Nelson enrolled at the University of Fort Hare, the only South African residential higher education institution for blacks at the time. After student protests, he was expelled in his third year of study. But he completed his law degree at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and, with Oliver Reginald Tambo, established the first black law firm that mostly provided free or low-cost legal counsel to blacks victimized by the country’s discriminatory laws.

Mandela joined the African National Congress at age 24 and rose to its leadership as he directed nonviolent acts of defiance against the South African government’s racist policies for two decades. After the 1961 Sharpeville massacre, when police killed 69 peaceful protesters, Mandela established the armed wing of the African National Congress, becoming its first commander-in-chief. In 1963, he was tried by the apartheid government for treason and sentenced to life imprisonment, at the age of 44, for political offenses, including sabotage.

Mandela was released unconditionally on 11 February 1990 at age 71 by President Frederik W. de Klerk, paving the way for negotiations between the government and anti-apartheid organizations. He was a formidable negotiator and charted a power-sharing deal with the architects of apartheid, the National Party. In 1993, Mandela and de Klerk received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Mandela became president of South Africa after the first democratic elections in 1994. At that time, 1 in 13 pregnant women



was HIV positive (national prenatal HIV prevalence was 7.6%). One of his first acts as president was to proclaim free health care for pregnant women and children. Mandela’s government gave due consideration to AIDS, making it a Presidential Lead Program. His government also appointed a leading local AIDS scientist as the country’s National AIDS Program Director.

Despite his recognition of AIDS as a serious health problem during his tenure, Mandela was focused on building a democratic, nonracial, nonsexist nation as a priority. He raised the bar on forgiveness by his benevolent tea invitation to the prosecutor who was responsible for his 27-year imprisonment. He set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1984 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize) to help the country deal with and purge its apartheid past. One of Mandela’s greatest achievements was to convince whites in South Africa that blacks would not oppress or treat them in the same way that they had treated blacks during apartheid. By voluntarily stepping down after his first term as president, an act seldom seen in Africa, where dictators frequently cling to power as lifetime presidents, Mandela confirmed that South Africa had indeed been set on the path of democracy.

By the end of his presidency in 1999, when almost one in four pregnant women was HIV positive (national prenatal HIV prevalence was 22.4%), Mandela had provided little personal leadership or contribution in the fight against AIDS, as a consequence of his competing nation-building priorities. He later spoke of his regret in not speaking out more forcefully about AIDS and set about making amends. Mandela is well known for saying, “Unlike some politicians, I can admit to a mistake.” He established the Nelson Mandela

A great world leader and humanitarian fought for racial equality, human rights, science education, and the rights of AIDS patients.

Children’s Fund, which supported community programs for preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV and caring for AIDS orphans.

His successor, President Thabo Mbeki, promoted AIDS denialism, which opposed the scientific consensus that AIDS was caused by a viral infection that could be treated by antiretroviral drugs. During this time, the Nelson Mandela Foundation sponsored a national household AIDS survey to focus the country’s attention on the urgent need to act against AIDS. Perhaps Mandela’s most important act regarding AIDS was to speak out at the 13th International AIDS Conference in 2000 in Durban, when he roused the audience to 17 standing ovations as he declared that South Africa and the world had to make AIDS treatment accessible to all who needed it. Mandela did not stop there; he fought AIDS stigma and discrimination by symbolically wearing a Treatment Action Campaign “HIV Positive” T-shirt. In his foreword to the book *HIV/AIDS in South Africa* (for which I was a coeditor) he highlighted that “we will not succeed until we appreciate the gender dimension of vulnerability to HIV” and “until we have addressed the stigmatisation and discrimination.” In 2005, he focused attention on AIDS-related stigma when he announced to the world, “My son has died of AIDS.” Nelson Mandela had effectively extended his fight for freedom to the fight for human rights in dealing with AIDS and soon thereafter to the fight against tuberculosis.

His philanthropy reached beyond AIDS to education as he pronounced that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” In establishing the Mandela Rhodes Foundation for educational scholarships in 2002, he became one of the country’s major contributors to postgraduate training in the sciences. Mandela saw this as central to creating the next generation of leaders for South Africa and the world.

Mandela set humankind on the paths of truth, selflessness, and freedom. His long walk was the first step toward freedom from oppression, freedom from want, and freedom from disease. With his passing, his legacy is in each of us as we follow in his footsteps in the enduring quest to make our world a better place for all.

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