

# Parish Magazine

## Ashprington Cornworthy Dittisham

### January 2014

#### IN THE PRESENCE OF GREATNESS

I have been asked if I would write something for the parish magazine about my work with Nelson Mandela.

I first met Madiba (as we referred to him - a term of affection meaning 'leader' in his native Xhosa) in 2003 when I was privileged to be asked to take part in organising his first HIV AIDS awareness concert in Cape Town. The concert was named after his prison number 46664.

Nelson Mandela was prisoner number 466 when he was incarcerated on Robben Island in 1964 for 17 years of his 27 years imprisonment. The prisoners on Robben Island were referred to by their prison numbers and now, 40 years on, people living with HIV were being treated in the same way, merely as numbers. Madiba understood the power of music and its ability to break down barriers and the impact that his prison number could have in helping to educate people, particularly the younger generations, about the pandemic. And so the 46664 campaign was launched at a star-studded live concert broadcast worldwide on November 30th 2003.

By the end of 2004 I had been asked to run 46664 internationally and with a small team of people, including my wife Clare. We developed the campaign which led to several international concerts and events, culminating in the 90th birthday concert in Hyde Park in 2008.

Madiba's legacy encompassed much more than just HIV AIDS. The creation of Mandela Day on July 18th, Madiba's birthday is the first day to be named after a living person. It was unanimously endorsed by the United Nations in 2009 as Nelson Mandela International Day. Significantly this was not about a day off, a holiday; but was to be a day on. A day for people to go out and do good work in their community, to show respect and care for others.

I was truly honoured to work for someone who is unarguably one of the greatest leaders of our time, and I was very fortunate and privileged to have met with him on many occasions. The impact he had on my life was transforming and I will never forget his humour, his smile or that unmistakable voice and that you dare not be late for an appointment!

It is not for me to wax lyrical about the man as there are so many fine writers such as John Carlin and Anthony Sampson in *Long Walk to Freedom*, who have captured the ethos of Mandela. While reading a recent article by local resident Anthony Lloyd, an award winning correspondent for the Times, I was reminded of what Madiba has taught us: humility in the face of the most shocking adversity in conflict zones



I am very conscious of what Nelson Mandela's legacy represents: justice, equality, forgiveness, compassion and humility. These shine like a beacon through the legacy that he has left the world.

My experiences brought me to a man of such character and moral authority that I could not help but feel I was in the presence of greatness. I witnessed pop stars, politicians, actors and people from all walks of life meet him and be awed by these endearing qualities.

As part of Mandela Day we once took a group of underprivileged teenage students (black, white and Hispanic) from the poorest parts of New York to South Africa. These kids had grown up with street-gangs and drug dealers as the norm. Many had never traveled outside of NY State let alone to Africa. Yet they all recognised that education was their main hope in moving forward in life and getting away from gangland culture. So we empowered these students to come up with a Mandela Day charter based on the social values to be found in Madiba's legacy. We gave them the chance to travel to Johannesburg to meet the man himself and to work with students from Soweto and Alexandra and to present their charter. The students researched and began to understand what Mandela had been through, what he stood for and how he had led the reconciliation process after apartheid. But it was the meeting of each student individually with Madiba that took our breath away. On being introduced each one was physically moved, most to tears and then, once Madiba had put them at ease, they sat and talked about their lives, their schooling and their hopes. These weren't kids from a comfy middle-class upbringing. These were hardened street kids looking for hope and a way out. The American students left South Africa and flew back to New York.

A few months later I met with them all again when we launched Mandela Day in July 2009. To see how that meeting with Madiba at his Foundation office in Houghton, Johannesburg had inspired them individually and collectively and the positive and lasting impact it had on them, was overwhelming and truly inspirational.

The Madiba Magic has inspired so many of us and being human I have to confess a feeling of enormous pride in having been just a very, very small part of his extraordinary life. Now though, it is important to allow that bit of Mandela in all of us to grow and to use his legacy to truly make the world a happier and better place for all to live.

Tim Massey, Ashprington