

How Mandela's release shaped MMC Ngobeni's political career

When former President Nelson Mandela was released from Pollsmoor Prison on 11 February 1990, South Africa was swept by widespread and unprecedented waves of jubilation and exhilaration, as the country, and the whole world, celebrated the homecoming of a man who had spent 27 of his life fighting for democracy, freedom and justice.

Also gripped in the euphoria was Fuzela Ngobeni, who was a 15-year-old learner at Kagisho Comprehensive School in Bloemfontein at the time. As the young Ngobeni watched Mandela, leader of the African National Congress (ANC), on a grainy black and white TV set, walking side-by-side with his wife, Winnie, waving to the crowds and punching the air with a clinched fist, he felt something burning inside. Ngobeni was angry at the apartheid government for incarcerating a man whose only crime was to fight for the freedom of his people.

The watershed moment of that afternoon stoked fires of political activism in his belly that was there all along, stemming from the liberation struggle that was underway across the country.

According to Ngobeni, who was appointed the City of Johannesburg's Member of the Mayoral Committee for Development Planning by Executive Mayor Herman Mashaba, after the Democratic Alliance (DA) and a coalition of political parties gained control of the metro following the 3 August 2016 local government elections, the release of President Mandela and other liberation movement struggle icons was a turning point in his life as a black child growing up in the dusty streets of Mangaung township.

Angry at the unequal and inferior education fed to blacks by the apartheid government, the teenager decided to join the ANC-aligned Congress of the South African Students (COSAS). This was at the time when Fikile Mbalula, now Minister of Police, was one of the students who were at the helm of the organisation in the Free State.

Ngobeni rose rapidly through the ranks, becoming the Deputy President of the Student Representative Council at his alma mater.

His political activism continued albeit with a lower key approach when he enrolled as a Tourism Management student at the Central University of Technology, then known as Technikon Free State. After obtaining his diploma in 1998, he started looking for a job in the Free State without success.

"I was forced to go and look for greener pastures in Johannesburg. But I had no relatives or friends in Johannesburg or Soweto. So I went to live with relatives in Kagiso on the West Rand. After a few calls and networking sessions, I got my first job as a receptionist at the Rivonia Inn Hotel," he says.

He worked for six months as a receptionist by day and an auditor by night. He later moved to join the Don Suite Hotel in Bruma Lake, Johannesburg, as a receptionist.

After two years he moved to Resorts Condominium International, a time share company, where he worked as a call centre agent. He worked his way up to become a Team Leader of a unit responsible for The Holiday Club Vacation Company.

In 2006, he joined Cathay Pacific Airways, a Hong Kong-based airliner, as a Customer Service Supervisor and later worked as its SADC Regional Supervisor. He was instrumental in the opening of a number of Cathay Pacific Airways' branches in the SADC region as the airline was spreading its wings.

This does not, however, mean that he was in the political wilderness, as he was following political developments in the country with keen interest. He says he had to scale down his political activities, because he wanted to advance his career and start a family. His first son, Obakeng, was born when his wife, Masetshaba, was still his girlfriend in 1997.

When Mosioua Lekota, Mluleki George and Mbhazima Shilowa among others, broke away from the ANC to lead the formation of the Congress of the People (COPE) following the acrimonious Polokwane elective conference, MMC Ngobeni was among the founding members of the new political party.

The father of two remained a member of COPE until 2011 when an elective congress failed to get underway in Pretoria, and the power struggle between Lekota and Mbhazima Shilowa became irreconcilable.

“After a lengthy discussion with DA leader Mmusi Maimane, who was a proportional representative councillor at the time, I decided to join the DA, as it was becoming clear to me that it was the only party that could take South Africa forward. I believed then as I do today that the DA is the party for the future, a party capable of creating more opportunities for our people, delivering better service delivery, stopping corruption and providing meaningful redress of the past imbalances” he says.

Ngobeni was elected to his portfolio only two years after he became a City of Johannesburg councillor. He says he is acutely aware of the critical nature of the portfolio, as it is at the centre of shaping Johannesburg into an inclusive and integrated city of the future. The yester-year Apartheid planning schemes left a legacy that intentionally demands a more robust spatial planning reform, to not only redress the prevailing apartheid geography but to restructure the city, shift ownership profiles & choices and engrave a more environmentally friendly, efficient and equitable urban form.

He says he is looking forward to working all stakeholders including the private sector in rejuvenating the Inner City, in the development of “inclusionary housing” which he believes is one of the policy interventions that that will pave the way for the rich and the poor to live side by side.

The Transit-Orientated Development Corridors, which he says is an urban revolution which seeks to build a new City along and around mass transit movement lines to create housing, job and social opportunities in proximity to each other, is another intervention that will assist in taking the City to another level.

Implemented properly, over the next few decades, TODs has the potential to transform neighbourhoods around stations and transit centres into vibrant hubs of mixed-use activity that bring people together. The TODs will also position the inner city as the core, consolidate the public transport backbone, and push for reinvestment in under-performing areas to create a compact polycentric city.

“After being given the opportunity to serve as MMC for Development Planning by Mayor Mashaba, I intend to serve the DA-led city for as long as it takes and more importantly to play my critical role in ensuring that this Administration delivers on the Executive Mayor’s 5 Strategic Pillars” he says.

Cllr Ngobeni, who lives in Cosmo City, spends his spare time watching soccer and reading. He is a staunch supporter of Bloemfontein Celtic, which is popularly known as Siwelele. It’s no surprise that when he moved to Johannesburg he ensured that a local branch was formed.