

Tribute to Khehla Mthembu

By Sam Mwai

How do you sum up a 30-year friendship in a few words? I first met Khehla in 1991 when he came to Kenya for an Insurance conference. Jaine, my wife, and I hosted him, Alan Hackett (his then business partner) and Vusi Sithole at our home in Nairobi. He had however been introduced to my family in South Africa earlier in the year by Gaby Magamola who was a friend of my brother-in-law then living in Botswana. A great friendship was forged at that gathering which led to many more occasions in Kenya and in South Africa.

My first visit to your great country was in 1992 when I had travelled to join my wife in Sun City. Khehla picked me from the then Jan Smuts airport and drove me to Johannesburg where I was staying. After the customary lunch, which didn't end until nightfall aided by several Castle lagers, we went to Kippy's Jazz bar. No sooner had we got there than some huge white policemen armed to the teeth stormed the club looking for someone. I had never witnessed such an incident and was petrified, but Khehla assured me this was normal, and they soon left and we were able to enjoy our Jazz. This was the beginning of many jazz nights and festivals with Bra K. On our return from SunCity, K wanted us to experience more of SA and invited us to join him on a trip to Morula Sun where he was to attend a conference. He brought along his young son Mangaliso, who he left in our company during the day as he worked. I think the young man had very fond memories because he asked his father many questions about us including whether we were really Kenyans because according to him the Kenyans he knew were known to be dark, tall and lean, and we didn't quite fit the description. K was trusting and extremely generous.

Through him I got to experience South Africa in a way that not many have. From SunCity, Durban, Winesense at Melrose...oh Winesense, to the Butcher Shop in Sandton the street parties in Soweto at Sakumizi's, the Wine Bar, Wandies and most recently Just Badela's; all the while learning the history of the struggle, through meeting his comrades.

I remember a visit to SunCity where a housekeeper was addressing me in Zulu, and I had no clue what she was saying. As she got more agitated K broke down in laughter almost falling off his stool. Upon inquiring what was going on he turned to the lady and spoke to her in Zulu. Her expression changed immediately, and she was most apologetic to me. Turns out she was upset because "us returnees from exile have forgotten our language and culture and we're no good". K's sense of humour was legendary and who will ever forget that goofy grin and warm smile!!!

In the late 90's I brought the Kenyan golf team to South Africa from Swaziland where we had gone to play in the Zone 6 Championship. K was then Chairman of Sun International and hosted us for dinner in his suite. Thereafter we got to play golf for two days courtesy of the Chairman. My Kenyan golfers have never forgotten that trip. Again, demonstrating K's generous spirit and his ease at cultivating friendships.

K was keen to connect with Kenya and being a great organiser, he put together a group of his friends to visit Kenya over Easter in 1993. In the group were Vusi Sithole, the late Jabu Mbuza, Mandla Mtsweni and I had family and friends from Kenya to join us. We took them to see the great Rift Valley and stayed at a hotel at the valley bottom by Lake Naivasha. It was during this visit that we received the sad news of the assassination of Chris Hani. Though devastated by this news it didn't dampen our spirits instead creating strong bonds and strengthening the friendship between everyone on that trip. Over the years we met other friends such as Prof Jerry Musala, Japi Moropa, Ashley Mabogoane, Dinky Morapone, Citi

In February 2011 we jointly organised a Kenya-South Africa business summit in Nairobi where he was accompanied by Madala Sekwala, Chief Bengani, Salala Lesela, Eng. Thabiso Likole, Papi Molotsane and Sakhi Sakhumzi. The next trip he made to Kenya was in April 2017 accompanied by Eng. Thabiso and Peter Maponya. On that occasion we were invited by the SA High Commissioner in Kenya HE Koleka Anita Mqulwana to the Freedom Day celebrations at the official residence. At some point I was on first name terms with the High Commissioners representing SA in Kenya as they were friends of K's and got to know me through him.

I was happy to invite K, Eng. Thabiso, Connie Molusi and Nkosinathi Biko to the Karen Masters Golf Tournament in June 2019. It was an intense 4 days between golf, dinner, drinks and sight-seeing. Sadly, this was to be his last visit to Kenya. My friends and I really enjoyed these interactions organising reciprocal visits to SA where K organised golf, Stanbic Jazz festival VIP tickets and new places for us to visit.

Khehla finally got the golf bug and became a serious player organising tournaments and socials for friends and Golf and Beyond was born. I was fortunate to be invited to play in a number of these annual tournaments and got to play some amazing golf courses and meet some SA legends. I remember Peter Vundla driving from Durban to make a 12 noon tee off with Amb Rakwena, K and I, wow, that is some respect! Through him I got to meet so many distinguished South Africans and take pride in keeping those friendships to date.

I celebrated 3 milestone birthdays with K, my 40th coincided with Million Dollar Challenge in SunCity where Tiger Woods played, and my late friend Abdalla Bekah and I were VIP guests. He then surprised me on my 50th and again on my 60th birthdays, having been with him in Joburg days earlier on both occasions on seeing me off he'd say "see you next year" only for him to rock up in Nairobi a few days later!!! Clearly my family valued this friendship, conspiring with him and ensuring he was there to celebrate with us. K's family became my family, with his children often coming to Kenya and staying with us, my last trip to Johannesburg in 2019 was to attend Managliso's wedding celebrations and GAB. My family became his – if I tell you all the stories, we have we'd be here for 3 days.

What always amazed me is that everywhere we went people recognised him and treated him with such honour and deference and he in his humble way showed them much compassion and respect. That is the sign of a true leader and a legend. He made time for me, my family and my friends anytime we visited SA, often picking me up in that beautiful Mercedes 500 sports car that he refused to let go off! Every time I saw it, I was reminded of the holiday when my son and nephew (4 and 5 yrs. old at the time) nearly wrote off another of his cars and K who was standing behind by accidentally releasing the handbrake while trying to stand out of the sunroof! Whether it was business or pleasure he always made himself available, except on Sunday morning, when he went to church religiously. Oh, I forgot that he could cook, I don't know how many of you have tasted his wonderful hangover slow cooked soup, the real hair of the dog!

Good people die every-day. Yet not all of them affirm for us the goodness in humanity and leadership the way Khehla did. He is gone but the legacy he left behind is filled with memorable experiences and adoration.

I will dearly miss him. RIP Mvelasi my friend, my brother till we meet again.