

Second Nelson Mandela Commemoration Lecture

Kampala, Uganda – 31<sup>st</sup> August 2017

Zoleka Mandela

Thank you for a wonderful introduction.

May I ask you all to rise from your seats as we observe a moment silence for my late grandfather, President Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, and in honour of our fallen heroes and heroines who have led the movement against injustices and inequalities that continue to plague our society.

Programme Director, Dr. Muwanga, Prof. State, Prof. Kirumira, Prof. Ssentamu, His Excellency Prof. Maj, Gen. Mollo, Prof. Mamdani, His Excellency President Museveni, Her Excellency First Lady Janet Museveni, today's panelists, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen ...

I would like to humbly extend a heartfelt thank you to the South African High Commission here in Kampala, Uganda for extending an invitation to today's Second Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture. I have been afforded the highest honour of addressing you today as a grandchild of a South African anti-apartheid activist and philanthropist who regarded the youth in particular, as future leaders who play a critical role in shaping the country's new democratic constitution. We have all convened here at Makerere University and at this Nelson Mandela lecture to memorialize his life, leadership and timeless legacy.

Greetings to all who have gathered here today. The theme of this year's Nelson Mandela Commemoration Lecture is: Nelson Mandela, the legend – Lessons for the youth. I have been tasked to present a keynote address on what advice my grandfather would have for the youth on their role and contribution to development and with personal aspirations for a better future. I have however, taken the liberty of appending my personal experiences not only as his granddaughter but as a child growing up under Apartheid in South Africa, a terrifying period for the majority of South Africans. I was born in 1980, for South Africans born after 1994, South Africa is a country that is arguably poles apart from the country that

their parents were born and raised. I am the oldest child of Zindziswa Nobutho Mandela, who at the time of my birth, was trained in guerilla warfare and involved in South Africa's freedom struggle. As the youngest daughter to my grandparents, Nelson Rolihlahla and Nomzamo Winfred Madikizela Mandela, my mother played a historic role in combating the forces of Apartheid. My father on the other hand; Oupa Johannes Seakamela, posed as a personal driver to my grandmother while she trained him to recruit cadres for Umkhonto WeSizwe. With both my parents making enormous personal sacrifices, growing up too quickly involved numerous attempts at trying to fill the void created by my absent parents.

I owe favour to both the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of this university together with the South African High Commission, on their choice of theme as the challenges faced by present day youth are an unrelenting cost to society and countries across the globe. Albeit the changes in the country's political system, the youth of today are continuously plagued by societal problems which counter-act their emancipation. My grandfather believed that children were the future of our nation and that young people will lead countries well into the next century. This is a notion equally shared by my grandmother, who strongly considers young persons, the determinants of society's future. My grandfather, highlighted the importance of championing children's rights with the aim of alleviating a wide range of violations towards them. Although his previously expressed wishes were for the youth to seek pleasure and comfort in nation-state support, misfortune deals them a bad hand. The Apartheid era for instance, unreservedly impacted the constitution of a generic family that provided for unfavourable household environments to say the least. This further manipulated the well-being and health of innocent children who are exposed to unwarranted risk factors that increased the likelihood of developing circumstances such as drug use, unsafe sex, early drinking, teenage pregnancy among many others.

My personal experiences growing up as a child were largely afflicted by the repercussions of growing up in an unconventional and unstable home environment that was mostly vulnerable. I had my very first drink at the age of nine, following multiple encounters with sexual and physical abuse. The severity of my drinking and drug use at the age of thirteen had escalated to a seventeen-year addiction to alcohol and suicidal behaviour that was

accompanied by a decade long drug dependency. An unsheltered life, poorly protected from the demoralizing ills of society is a narrative commonly shared by members of the youth and those like me who are born into politically famous families. It is with urgency that we prioritize the needs of young people who face many challenges in modern day society and unpack these issues with the hopes of providing environments that are conducive enough for them to become successful, responsible and educated adults.

My grandfather once said that although our continent is celebrated for its beauty, natural heritage as well as it's abundant resources, that the suffering of Africa's children torments the very principles of the continent and the world. In his belief, all young people have the right to social, political, cultural development and freedom. In 1996, he recapped the following; that families who live in shacks with no running water, sanitation and electricity are reminders that the past continues to haunt the present. In his opinion, the existence of children who sleep in the streets and are forced to beg in order to make a living is an indication that government has not successfully concluded its directives. Inequality is a reality currently faced by the youth with many of them living below the breadline, the poverty level has escalated due to triggers such as an increase in economic growth and unemployment. The latter, a phenomenon that has increasingly become chronic. As such, the quality of one's education will have an effect on unemployment, leading to substance abuse, crime, acts of violence, poverty so on and so forth.

I'm reminded of a time that my grandfather sent for me in order to collect my birthday present shortly after he and my grandmother divorced, he had gifted me with a brown box filled with books on various countries. How he called me into his office one afternoon to advise me on completing my first degree in South Africa with the hopes of covering all expenses associated with my post degree. Regrettably, while he attempted to empower the youth through education, I dropped out of college due to an addiction to drugs and alcohol. Prior to that, I had left high-school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade to give birth to my daughter at the tender age of seventeen. My shame consumes me, as the rise in the number of vulnerable and poor students continues as a result of the high cost of education in our country, preventing aspiring students from receiving the pleasures of a quality education that can further provide opportunity and skill. For years, all the monies that both my grandparents

poured into my education were wasted after I dropped out college for no other reason other than to feed my need for drugs and alcohol.

He always thought of education as a formidable approach to changing the world, that and in conjunction with laying emphasis on how our individualistic efforts can create better lives for all. In a recent conversation with my grandmother on some of the challenges faced by the youth, she expressed great concern over the modernization of our society. According to her, in the earlier times, children were born into communities and it is within those communities that they were brought up to maintain moral values of that particular time. To her, communities of today ought to expose children to their culture, a concept that defines an individual regardless of how today's democracy may conflict with it.

If my grandfather was here today and addressing the youth here at Makerere University, his advice on their role and contribution to development, he would echo my grandmother's words and urge society to return to a sense of community where members not only satisfy their need for belonging but remind each other that they matter. To him, we owe it to the most vulnerable citizens of our society, the youth - to insert carefulness and compassion in the manner that we act towards them. Shortly after we moved into what is now my grandmother's home when he was released from prison, regular eating together at table fast became a family tradition for us. That table was an important place to be for us as it helped build our relationship and because it gave us a sense of connectedness as a family.

I was four months old when my grandfather held me for the first time, my grandmother had smuggled me into Robben Island with the assistance of a prison guard. I suppose the tears that filled his eyes were resultant of how his sacrifices for the liberation of South Africa may have been to the detriment of his role as a father to his own children having been imprisoned so early in their childhood? My family shared my grandfather with the world, one can imagine the pressures of trying to find your own identity with someone so incredibly well-known. I remember travelling to Morocco on a state visit with him decades ago and how he spent the duration of our flight insisting that I wave to the people like he did and how I should follow in his political footsteps, I often wonder why he often asked for me accompany him to all those events all those years ago. I remember how incredibly strict

he was especially with my mother, he had the walls of our family home extended each time she jumped the walls when he would refuse for her leave the house as old as she was. Upon his arrival from prison, we now had to get accustomed to curfews, set bedtimes and a strict regime within the house hold. He was also remarkably funny and with a witty sense of humour. With a sinking heart, I realize that I may never have an opportunity to make him proud of me, after all the years that I wounded, shamed and shown contempt to him and my entire family as a result of my addiction to substances.

One of the greatest lessons he taught me is that we can only achieve ourselves by giving of ourselves to others, that despite our very own misfortunes, we all possess an innate power to positively impact the lives of others. His legacy is more than what he has left behind but my birthright that will continue to grow and extend itself to those who are as fully committed as I am to ensuring better outcomes for those rendered silent by injustice and inequality. It is through the lessons of my grandparents that I personally embarked on a crusade to use my life experiences to create awareness, instill hope and educate my community on surviving ten years of physical abuse, surviving five years of sexual abuse, surviving depression, suicide and addiction after seventeen years of abusing alcohol and ten years of abusing drugs, surviving Breast Cancer at the age of thirty two, surviving Breast Cancer, menopause and infertility at the age of thirty six to life after tragically losing my daughter to a drunk driving road crash and my son to complications at birth. Since its inception in 2012, the Zoleka Mandela Foundation continues to make empowerment an integral part of our approach in the treatment of those largely affected by addiction, child death, life threatening diseases like Cancer, sexual and physical abuse.

In those days before my grandfather passed on, I spent many afternoons with him each week. I remember how he would reach out for my hand and how throughout my time with him, he would squeeze it after holding onto to it for what felt like the longest time because during that time, not a single word would be exchanged between us. There is so much that I wanted to say, like, "Granddad, I'm so sorry that I never got to make you proud of me whilst you were still alive." In my selfish way, I often dream about what your last words to me would have been if you had not been too ill to speak words or if I hadn't wasted my life choosing alcohol and drugs over my own children and family. Do you remember what you

said to me after you sat me on your lap in 2010 after Zenani passed on two days after her thirteenth birthday, “Darling! You are not the only one who has lost a child. I have lost a child and many people have – but for you, it is so that you can bring hope to many.” I don’t think you will ever know how those few words have changed my life forever.

My grandfather has always taught us that by empowering children in allowing them to speak up for themselves, we are well on our way to building a better future. Children, he says, should be guided and supported in their fight toward a life free from pain and suffering. I realize that he’s been right about so many other things. He has said that freedom comes with responsibility and as my grandmother always says, freedom should never be taken for granted because freedom is our pride, that freedom continues to show the world that absolutely anything is possible.

My message to the youth today is this: I know that there are so many of them that are experiencing difficulty in understanding exactly where it is that they fit into this world, many who may feel unimportant, unloved and unheard – I hope that they are reminded that there are seeds of greatness that exist within them all, seeds that will inevitably blossom whatever way the winds of life may blow them. Like a root of any tree serves many purposes, it is their shared responsibility to plant seeds in the lives of others and to function as anchors that serve to provide stability to an unsteady society.