

## Nelson Mandela

NARRATOR:

Against overwhelming odds, he achieved his dream of equality for all South Africans. Nelson Mandela was born on July 18, 1918, in a small South African village. His father, a tribal chief, gave his son the name Rolihlahla. At the age of seven, he began his British education, and his teacher gave him the name Nelson.

When his father died, Nelson was sent to live with the leader of the Thembu people. He groomed Nelson for leadership, letting him sit in on council meetings, sending him to the finest schools. During a break from college, Nelson ran away to Johannesburg in order to avoid a prearranged marriage. It was 1941, and for the first time Nelson came face to face with the brutal reality of a racially divided South Africa.

ABOSEDE GEORGE, Professor, Barnard College / Columbia University:

By entering the city as kind of an anonymous black person, he gets a firsthand experience of what black life is like for urban black South Africans at that time. And he gets a kind of immediate confrontation with the white apartheid racist state.

YVETTE CHRISTIANSE, Professor, Fordham University:

I think that he had two languages. He had a deep, historical language from his own learning, his own training within his tribal background, but I also think that he had a language of the law. He had a completely contemporary language, and he brought those two together in the language of human rights.

NARRATOR:

He began attending meetings of the African National Congress, an organization that aimed to establish a democratic government. During this time, he married his first wife, Evelyn.

ABOSEDE GEORGE:

The apartheid regime really begins to be kind of – it builds up after 1948, when the National Party comes into power, and they were the party of apartheid.

NARRATOR:

A year later, the ANC adopted nonviolent civil disobedience as official policy. In 1952, they launched the campaign for the defiance of unjust laws, and Nelson traveled South Africa in support of that effort. The National Party government took steps to restrict Nelson's movements, banning him from attending any gatherings, and confined him to Johannesburg.

YVETTE CHRISTIANSE:

He was made the chief volunteer of the youth league's national defiance campaign, and that's when the authorities began to notice him. The government knew that they had someone that they could not look away from.

ABOSEDE GEORGE:

He and Oliver Tambo decide to set up a law firm that will specialize in serving the black population, that will be a kind of low-priced law firm, an accessible law firm, and that will specialize in defending black clients against the apartheid laws. [3:04]

NARRATOR:

In 1956, the government arrested Nelson and 150 other activists, charging them with treason. Nelson's relentless dedication to activism took a toll on his personal life, and his wife Evelyn left him. As he waited four years for his trial, he met a beautiful young independent-minded Winnie Madikizela, who would become his second wife in 1958.

In 1960, the South African government outlawed the African National Congress. Mandela went underground and formed the Umkhonto we Sizwe, the Spear of the Nation.

YVETTE CHRISTIANSE:

Umkhonto we Sizwe was formed after Sharpeville, when 67 people were killed – men, women, and children – and over 180 were wounded during a peaceful demonstration. It was at that time that Mandela realized – and I think it was a very difficult decision for him – that nonviolent resistance was not enough.

NARRATOR:

Since he was wanted by the government, he traveled abroad, secretly gaining support for the cause. When he returned to South Africa, he was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. While in prison, he was also charged with sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the government.

Mandela stood trial, but refused to defend himself because this would legitimize the state's case. Mandela received a life sentence to be served in the prison on Robben Island, a desolate rock island seven miles off the coast of Cape Town.

Instead of being forgotten in jail, Mandela became a symbol for the movement to end apartheid. During the 1980s, several offers of release were made to Mandela on the condition that he renounce violence. He refused.

In February of 1990, the government declared the ANC legal and announced Mandela was to be released.

ABOSEDE GEORGE:

Here's this man who hasn't been seen for over a quarter century walking out into the world.

NARRATOR:

Now free at the age of 71, Mandela was named the head of the ANC. His work to help bring an end to apartheid earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. In 1994, for the first time in more than 300 years, blacks in South Africa would have the opportunity to vote for their rulers. At the age of 75, Mandela was elected president in a landslide.

EMIL WILBEKIN, Managing Editor, Essence.com:

Becoming the president, I think he really, really moved the world, because this was a place that most of us didn't think would ever see black leadership. And so for him to rise to power after being in jail for 27 years, I think it was just a really historic moment. [5:57]

NARRATOR:

Mandela proved to be a master politician, knowing when to be unyielding and when to compromise. Unfortunately, his marriage to Winnie came to an end in 1996. In 1998, Mandela married his third wife on his 80th birthday. The following year, he stepped down as president of the ANC.

Nelson used his stature to help mediate the civil war in Burundi. He continues to work with human rights organizations and for AIDS awareness.

EMIL WILBEKIN:

I think that he will be known as one of the peaceful freedom fighters of our time.

NARRATOR:

Nelson Mandela continues to be a defining symbol of how one man can truly make a difference in the world.