

# Chamusso pays tribute to Madiba

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Mr Patrick Chamusso

NELSPRUIT – Mpumalanga News was privileged to have an exclusive interview with one of the province’s heroes, who took part in the fight for the country’s liberation during the apartheid era.

He is none other that the 2008 Ubuntu Award winner, Mr Patrick Chamusso, of the deep rural village of Mganduzweni near White River.

He had a lot to say about the role played by the country's first black president, Tata Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, especially from what he learnt during his own stay in prison.

"I joined the fight for liberation in 1976 after hearing that Madiba was fighting for everyone's freedom because we couldn't move anywhere without carrying a dompas," he said.

He was motivated by Madiba's actions before he even met him personally. "He motivated me to leave everything that I was doing, to join the struggle," he said.

He was arrested at Middelburg in 1981 and was charged with treason and terrorism after bombing Sasol and Trans Alloy. He bombed the two companies to show his dissatisfaction about the apartheid regime which did not want to engage with the ANC. Chamusso's trial began in 1982 at the Supreme Court of Pretoria. He was found guilty of terrorism and was sentenced to 24 years' imprisonment on December 6, 1982. He was sent to Robben Island in 1983, but Madiba was no longer there at that time.

"I found Govan Mbeki as the leader and was received by a structure formed by Madiba, in which all comrades were warmly received even though Madiba was no longer there " he explained.

"We regularly received soap and the reception shows we were at Tata's home," he said.

Chamusso said that in 1990, after seeing the news on national television about Madiba' release, the comrades who were in Robben Island knew that it meant their freedom, too.

"We used to say to each other 'Ibomvu indlela', and knew that he would not go and leave us behind because he was a man of his word."

Chamusso said he was grateful for all the education he received while he was in prison. “Other comrades, including Mr Jeff Hadebe, the minister of justice, taught us to read and write. Madiba motivated me because he was the one who formed those structures so that everyone, young and old, who came to the island, would also learn,” he said.

After spending 10 years in prison, Chamusso was finally released in 1991 and was received by the former minister of finance, Mr Trevor Manuel. The year 1991 was also a turning point for Chamusso as this was the year that marked his first personal encounter with Madiba.

“I was in an office at Luthuli House and was there to report about my release. The late Comrade Joe Slovo was with me in the office, he called Mandela.” He said when Mandela came in, he tried to rise from his seat, but was magnetically held back. Mandela also sat down, next to him.

“Slovo turned to Madiba and said: ‘Comrade Mandela, this is Comrade Hot Stuff’, (Hot stuff was Chamusso’s code name, of which he was at the time unaware. He was apparently given the name after the Sasol bombing because he apparently used hot stuff to bomb it.

“We both wanted to rise from our seats, but couldn’t. We held each others’ hands with a strong shake for the first time,” and Mandela said to me ‘Well done, Comrade!’”

When this newspaper asked Chamusso about this historic handshake, he said, “Oh! I felt out of this world, I felt as if I’d touched the hand of an angel. I couldn’t believe that I had touched the hands that shook the world,” he said in amusement.

“At that moment, I forgot all about the 10 years I’d spent in prison. All the pain and torture I’d suffered there was healed on that that day by Madiba’s touch,” he continued.

The second time Chamusso met Madiba face to face was at 32 Commissioner's Street in Johannesburg during an ANC meeting. "That was our second handshake," he said.

"At last we were free and started voting in 1994. I really admired Madiba because he was the one who freed the South African people, black and white alike. We no longer have to carry IDs. If apartheid was still alive, I wouldn't have travelled nationwide and overseas as I have today. I have been to Japan, Hong Kong, USA and other countries. If it weren't for Madiba, I wouldn't have done so," he continued.

He expressed his pain about Madiba's ill health. "I fasted and prayed for his recovery. I wish him a speedy recovery, we still need him very much. I had been praying ever since he was admitted to hospital," he said.

Chamusso said he also learnt from Madiba to love unconditionally, care and forgive. He said he was inspired by his life to continue doing well for his community. He uses his resources to help the needy of his village – he feeds them, buys them school uniforms and even assists them in times of disaster. He also founded his Two Sisters Community Development project from his special pension which is aimed at giving back to the community by assisting the disadvantaged and creating job opportunities for the unemployed.

His contributions to the community were highly praised in 2008 when he won the Ubuntu Award. "I am still doing service for the community, the struggle is still on," he said.

His centre is currently running a sewing project where he uses the skills he acquired during his jail term to teach everyone who is willing to learn. He also made peace with Sasol years ago and as a result, Sasol sponsored his project with six sewing machines and overlockers.

He had employed three people full-time who were previously unemployed and has since created jobs for 6 000 people from his area. “We sew bedding equipment like duvets and comforters and everyone who is unemployed and reliable, is allowed to come and sell them for us,” he said.

Chamusso runs similar projects in other parts of the province including Witbank, Middelburg, Hendrina, Mkhuhlu, Belfast and Bushbuckridge. His skills have helped many previously disadvantaged people of the region. He urged the community not to wait for government to do things for them, but to stand up and fight unemployment. “Anyone who is unemployed and wants to start a business can come to me,” he said.

The centre also has a children’s library where learners can read and improve their vocabulary in English. “Education is a powerful tool to open doors for our youth,” he concluded.

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