

## **The eye of leadership | Ronnie Govender passes on...**

Never bound by time, and though seemingly disjointed, it is both the sporadic and structured efforts of our leadership that ensures cohesion.

It is through their eyes that we are able to see better.

Sathieseelan Gurulingam Govender, most commonly known as Ronnie Govender once informed me of the deep leadership of the real world bus driver, the fruit seller, the fisher, the petrol attendant, the school teacher... and yes also the fictional world but perhaps not so fictional child of Mothi the shit-bucket-carrier, in the play *The Lahnee's Pleasure*.

Whether playing the 7 year old child of Mothi in my grandfather Ronnie Govender's play... or trying to drink some of the whisky in his cabinet in my early teens... or going for a swim with him in the ocean with my sisters and cousins... or even when dealing with life's challenges, he always triggered and directed our conscience and atman towards the battle for systematic change in the world.

Atman is the limitless spiritual life principles of the universe, especially when regarded as inherent in the individual's real self.

Through his creativity, theatre productions, books, and activism, my grandfather brought issues to the fore. He had the deft knack of raising consciousness, fearlessness and joy through his writing and works, of which the Special Branch (apartheid era police unit) did not like.

Anyone who ever read his books or watched his plays can attest to this, not to mention the list of accolades in recognition of his work.

My grandfather was a brilliant writer who also educated his grandchildren to be aware of the type of writing that discriminates and oppresses, and the power it has to destroy.

But back to the eye of leadership... there is still an uphill battle, but it is clear that all the various efforts and methods to change the terrain continue to add up for the better.

When I was a very young boy, Ronnie Govender my "Thatha" (grandfather) once slept over at our flat in Greenfields, Sydenham.

Not many know, but Ronnie only had one organic eye, his other eye was a glass eye because of an exploding bottle occurrence.

Anyhow, before going to bed that night, he placed his glass eye in a glass of water, but this was the first time I saw him doing it, of which I did not fully understand the nature of his

eye... and I'm sure you can imagine the sheer childhood wonderment of witnessing such a thing.

I could not keep myself still and I kept asking him about his eye, I wanted to hold it. He kept saying "No" but after a while of my persistence he let me stand close, allowing me to only look at it in the water, but not to touch it.

Obviously that was not good enough for me, so I woke up early and while he was snoring, I put my hand in the water, lifted the eye out and quickly exited the flat...

After spending time inspecting the eye myself, I rushed to show my friends... I knocked door to door in our block of flats rounding up all the other kids to show them my grandfather's eye. One kid even asked if my grandfather could see us all through it.

Minutes later, after chasing me, Ronnie eventually caught me and demanded his eye back. That was in the mid 80s.

Nowadays Ronnie Govender's eye is taking a break.

But at 40yrs old, I wish I could take his eye and hold his vision every day... I wish I could share his eye with my neighbours again... the eye of leadership.

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Ronnie Govender was a distinguished and influential liberation writer born as a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation South African on 16 May 1934 to Jack Dorasamy Govender (bakery van driver & trade unionist) and Chellama Govender (housewife). His grandparents were indentured labourers who later hawked vegetables, with his maternal grandfather also being a court interpreter.

Ronnie Govender's 10 siblings are Gonapushni, Gonaseelan, Krishna, Maganathan, Dasarathan, Garunathan, Kamala and Kasturie, both Vanasachie and Nandi passed on before and shortly after they were 1 years old respectively.

Ronnie Govender passed on to rest on Thursday, 29 April 2021 just after 5pm.

He was married to Kamalam Govender (a teacher who speaks 5 languages).

He had 4 children, Dayanandan Govender (passed away in 2013), Pregaluxmi Govender, Samantha Naidoo and Patmanathan Govender.

His 10 grandchildren are Karlind Govender, Parusha Naidoo, Yashodan Naidoo, Triya Govender, Disha Govender, Kamil Govender, Nirvana Govender, Saien Benjamin, Sachin Maru and Arani Maru

Ronnie's 3 great grandchildren are Arami Aranguren, Rumi Govender and Ameya Aranguren.

His awards include:

- Order of Ikhamanga, by the South African Government for his contributions to democracy, human rights and justice through theatre, 2008
- Commonwealth Writer's Prize, for his book *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, 1997. This is also a South African Matric book set work.
- Honorary Doctor of Technology in Arts and Design, Durban University of Technology, 2014
- Medal, English Academy of South Africa, for his contribution to English literature, 2000
- Shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, for his book *Song of the Atman*, 2007
- Lifetime Achievements Award, South African Arts and Culture Trust, 2007

Other roles:

- Treasurer, Students Democratic Association, UCT
- Sports Journalist, New Age
- Sports Journalist, Boxing Column, Graphic
- Co-founder, Durban Theatre Association
- Former Vice-President, Natal Congress of South African Writers (COSAW)
- Marketing Manager, Baxter Theatre in Cape Town
- Director, Durban's Playhouse Theatre
- Resident Director, University of Durban-Westville's (now University of KwaZulu-Natal – Durban Westville Campus) Asoka Theatre
- Executive Member, South African Soccer Federation (SASF)
- Founding Member, South African Council on Sport (SACOS)

Books and Plays:

- The Lahnee's Pleasure
- Swami
- At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories
- Song of the Atman
- In the Manure: Memoirs and Reflections
- Beyond Calvary
- His Brother's Keeper
- Off Side
- Inside
- Blossoms from the Bough
- Black Chin, White Chin

Written by Karlind Govender (Ronnie Govender's eldest grandchild)

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