

A letter to Hector Pieterse: you did not die in vain

Pupils re-enact the the Soweto uprising on its 27th anniversary. Here a fatally wounded Hector Pieterse, the first victim to die in the clashes, is carried by a schoolmate in search of medical help.



PICTURE: APM

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Simon Sonnekus

DEAR Hector (and the youth of Soweto of 1976),

Although I know you will never receive this letter, I am writing it to say thank you.

You were only 13 years old when Sam Nzima took the photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubo carrying your lifeless body.

And of your sister, Antoinette Sithole, crying hysterically, beside him.

You would have been 52 this year. You did not see the dawning of democracy over our beautiful country.

When I see Sam's photo, I realise that you never had the chance to grow older and to become successful in life.

You weren't able to have children or to experience the love of a significant other.

Fate intervened on June 16, 1976, but it was not in vain.

I am writing this letter to tell you that your life meant so much to so many South Africans.

To this day, when I look at the photograph, I realise how lucky I am to have grown up in a free society.

You can pride yourself, wherever you are now, on being an instigator of change in this diverse country.

Yes, Hector, that photograph has become an iconic image of the struggle you and your fellow students endured for equality and education in your mother tongue.

Your heroism is inscribed in our country's constitution, where all the 11 official languages are now recorded.

This has allowed me to meet so many influential people whom I would not have known if the warped ideology of Bantu education had endured.

Their influence in my life opened my eyes, and, more importantly, my mind.

They are my family in this wonderful rainbow nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet Uzair Abdul-Karrim, the little Muslim boy whom I met in Mrs

Berry's Grade 1 classroom at Leicester Road School in Johannesburg.

We were only 7 years old then, but his interesting insights, quirky behaviour and hilarious anecdotes ensured that we would still be friends today.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet Melukuhle Mtombeni and Keke Makuta.

They became my blood brothers when I shared a dormitory with them at Grey College in Bloemfontein.

The conversations we had in Dorm 31 opened my eyes to how others perceive life, the universe and everything else.

In darkness and the comfort of our beds, we would have long dis-

cussions about issues of race and religion.

That photo has become an iconic image of the struggle you endured for equality and education in your mother tongue

Melo and Keke were influential in broadening my perspective on so many things during our high school years.

Their insights were valuable in establishing the realisation that we are all South Africans and equal, despite our different skin colour.

For this, they will always be my brothers.

Thank you for people like Wynona Louw, Piet Matipa, Lebona Sello, Al-

bertina Ngobeni, Siviwe Feketha and Kayla Alexander.

Like Melo and Keke, they have added value to my life as a young South African.

I met each of them at university where they have added new vision

in the way I perceive South Africa, the country that I proudly call my own.

They taught me valuable lessons and gave critical advice on how to become the best possible citizen in this rainbow nation.

Thank you, Hector, for without your sacrifice none of these amazing people would have crossed my path.

Their influences will remain a part of my being and for that I shall always be grateful.

Thank you for laying down your life, an ultimate sacrifice for a free and equal society.

Thank you for taking a stand for what you believed in.

We shall continue to tell your story.

We shall keep your legacy alive. We shall continue to fight for what is right.

Until we meet up in the clouds one day

● **Sonnekus is a BPhil student in journalism at Stellenbosch University.**