

Celebrating Nelson Mandela's birthday

Written by Freddie Allen, NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The Black community joined the world in singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to ailing former South African president Nelson Mandela when he turned 95 on July 18. The Nelson Mandela Foundation created the international day of service following Mandela’s 90th birthday to celebrate the legacy of the anti-apartheid leader.

“Clearly we have chosen to honor President Nelson Mandela on his 95th birthday, but the truth of the matter is that this is a man of such significance, substance, and importance that we should be honor him every day,” said Johnnetta Cole, director of the National African Art Museum and first African-American woman to serve as president of Spelman College in Atlanta.

The foundation encouraged people around the world to dedicate 67 minutes to serving their community, a minute for each year Mandela spent in public service.

Michael Eric Dyson, a sociology professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., said that Black people in America shared a special connection to the Black people of South Africa, each group facing rigid forms of institutionalized racism in the 20th century – apartheid in South Africa and Jim Crow in the United States.

“Black people understood the roots of that apartheid the vicious way in which the legal system worked against the freedoms of those people, and the way in which society prevented the flourishing and mobility of Black people in South Africa and in America,” said Dyson. “We understood when Black South Africans had to show their [identification] cards to any White person to prove their citizenship and their ability to move around. So we understood that our shared struggle was against a common enemy: White supremacy and colonialism.”

Cole said that Black Americans continue to feel solidarity with their South African sisters and brothers.

“There is a long and very deep and very important connection between African Americans and the people of South Africa,” she explained. “Apartheid and legalized racial discrimination in the United States were like kissing cousins and many people understood that relationship and we as African Americans contributed our support to the anti-Apartheid movement.”

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Apartheid, a system of racial segregation in South Africa, began in 1948 when the minority ruling White Afrikaner party split South Africans into racial groups ("native", "white", "coloured", and "Asian"). Families were uprooted, neighborhoods were razed in an effort to keep the racial groups separate. Under the brutal system, Black South Africans received inferior education, health care and public services. Nelson Mandela worked to organize Black South Africans in secrecy and in public fighting the racist apartheid policies. Mandela was arrested and sentenced to life in prison in June of 1964 and served 27 years. Even as Black Americans, suffered their own racism, they supported Black South Africans in their battle for equality. Following decades of political and economic pressure, the South African government began to dismantle apartheid in 1990 and freed Nelson Mandela that same year. In 1994, Mandela was elected South Africa's first Black president.

Dyson said that for many Black Americans, Mandela was their substitute president.

"We were grateful for [Mandela's] rise," said Dyson. "We celebrate Mandela, because Mandela gave us that example that paradigm that inspiration even as we furnished some example and some inspiration for South Africa."

During a Nelson Mandela Day event on Capitol Hill, members of Congress, civil rights leaders and shared stories of success and sacrifice inspired by the legendary South African leader that retired from public life in 2004.

Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) said that President Mandela taught the world invaluable lessons about determination, leadership, and unity.

"I regard President Mandela as a personal hero, and I am among the many that have been profoundly moved by both him and the people of South Africa," said Waters.

She added: "President Mandela once said that 'What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.' Few embody this quote better than Nelson Mandela himself, whose lifelong struggle against racism and apartheid not only improved the lives of all South Africans, but also showed the world what is possible when one man refuses to sacrifice his ideals."