

# How Nelson Mandela changed doctor's life

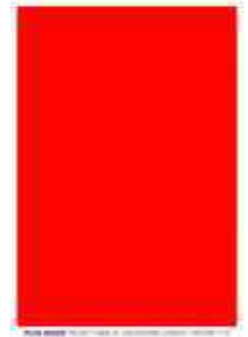
The West Weekend

Saturday 3rd August 2024

1382 words

Page 35,36,37 | Section: AGENDA

3071cm on the page



## How Nelson Mandela changed doctor's life

Leader of the anti-apartheid struggle inspired WA surgeon to help those in need, writes **Malcolm Quekett**

**A**claimed surgeon Peter Friedland was filled with dread.

But it was not the same apprehension so often felt in violence-plagued South Africa. This was different.

Professor Friedland was on his way to visit one of the giants of modern history, Nelson Mandela – who he respectfully addressed by his tribal name, Madiba – at the

former South African president's home in Johannesburg.

The ear, nose and throat surgeon had looked after Mandela's hearing – damaged by age and breaking rocks while imprisoned for his struggles against apartheid in South Africa – for the best part of a decade, and the men had grown close.

And now he was afraid how Mandela would receive the news that the violence and lawlessness

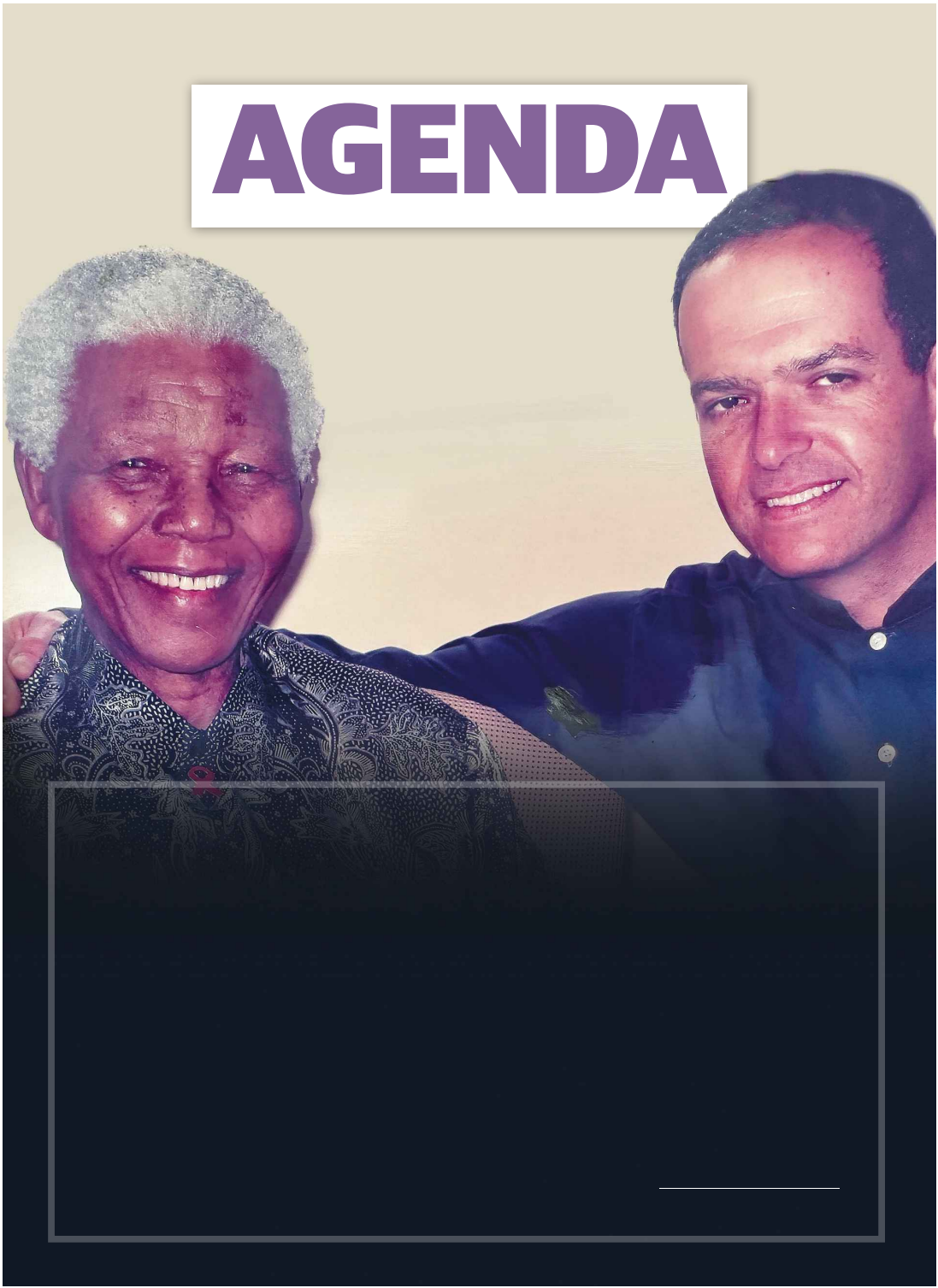
in that country – which had taken a terrible toll, including on his family and friends – had finally driven him to take his family out of harm's way by moving to Perth.

After all, this was the man who had sacrificed so much personally, including spending 27 years in prison during his fight to dismantle apartheid and bring freedom and justice to his people.

How would he look on Professor Friedland's request for his blessing



# AGENDA



**CONTINUED PAGE 36**

**FROM** PAGE 35

to leave?

There was no judgment or scolding.

Instead, after a long silence, Mandela told Professor Friedland of the time he had visited Australia years before, after his release from prison, and of his mistake.

For he had arrived in Australia without knowing about this country's Indigenous history, and without seeking the blessing of, and a meeting with, Aboriginal leaders.

In his new book, *Quiet Time With The President: A Doctor's Story About Learning To Listen*, Professor Friedland recounts what Mandela told him:

"I want to tell you, don't think you are so clever, because I thought I was so clever. I was arrogant," Mandela said.

"Never use ignorance as an excuse as I did. Make sure you thoroughly study the places you are going to, the history and all its peoples.

"And doctor, wherever you go in the world, read about the Indigenous people, and give them the respect that I failed to give in Australia. There is no excuse.

"We are all part of humanity. If you go anywhere in the world and you contribute to the underprivileged, it doesn't matter if it is in Africa or Australia or for that matter anywhere else. If you do that you have my permission."

Professor Friedland writes "When I heard that I cried, openly and unashamedly."

Mandela had finally been freed from prison in 1990 and was elected South Africa's President in 1994. He served five years before stepping down.

And yet he remained a towering presence and his views were often sought.

Professor Friedland had remained a keen observer.

"I used to watch him quite

intently on television, and I could see that he was often missing the cues of the questioner," Professor Friedland told *The West Australian*.

"I knew Madiba was absolutely direct, he was sharp, he was incisive.

"I knew that when he was delaying and

prevaricating he wasn't hearing the question. "The tragedy of hearing loss is it's exhausting for the person who's got hearing loss and it's exhausting for everybody around them.

"And it's invisible. If you can't see or you have a broken leg, people will pick it up immediately.

"If they can't hear they can smile or nod their heads, you don't know, so everyone assumes that you are OK."

Eventually he received permission to go to see Mandela.

"I visited him on a Sunday afternoon, I was completely overcome with emotion the first time I saw him," Professor Friedland said.

He found that Mandela's old, outdated hearing aids were not working, and his ears were blocked.

After attending to both problems, he said Mandela "immediately had this beautiful smile".

"And he said 'ah doctor, now I am going to hear the things I should not be hearing'."

Professor Friedland continued to see Mandela, sometimes at a clinic for arranged consultations, and at other times he would be called spontaneously to the house by Mandela's housekeeper or his wife Graça Machel.

It was often on those visits that the men would talk about current events, which Mandela was always on top of after reading the morning newspapers cover to cover.

"He read the Afrikaans newspapers first," Professor

Friedland said.

"He had taught himself Afrikaans in Robben Island (prison), the language of the oppressor, so that he could negotiate with the wardens for his fellow prisoners.

"He realised that with negotiation it wasn't just talking to someone's head, you had to speak to their heart.

"You had to touch their soul and the way of touching their soul was to say, 'I'm prepared to meet you in your language'.

"He had read the newspapers and so I could just branch into something from the newspapers

and then he would say to me, whenever he was about to give me a story, he would say 'no doctor', and then I knew 'here it comes'.

"It was like a parable. It was like imparting some biblical wisdom."

Their conversations gave unique insights into Mandela's commitment to his values and to those who had supported his struggle, as well as his worldview and even his dealings with world leaders.

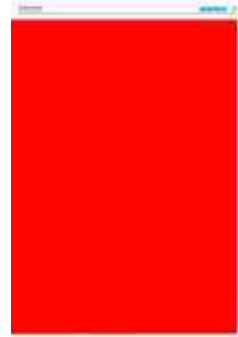
"On his travels, Madiba's moral authority enabled him to buzz from one president to another, without regard to the ideological distance between them," Professor Friedland writes.

"When he visited (Cuban leader Fidel) Castro, and then immediately flew north to visit (US President) Bush Senior, the US media found this unacceptable.

"But then Madiba could straddle apparent opposites. I believe he knew there would be a political clash but chose not to be derailed by it because he thought about the world differently.

"One afternoon, he told me the story of Bush sitting him down in the Oval Office and offering him Kentucky bourbon.

"Madiba declined. When asked if there was anything else he'd prefer, he cheerfully answered, 'Yes, please, I'll have



some Cuban rum’.”

Mandela’s messages resonated.

Chief among them was his belief in humanity, telling Professor Friedland that every human had the dignity of their own birthright, irrespective of race, colour, creed or gender.

“And if we can recognise this humanity, in every single living person, then that is the basis on which we can appreciate them and value them,” Professor Friedland said.

“He always said he doesn’t believe that people are born hating, they have learnt to hate.

“And if you have learnt to hate you can learn to love.”

Professor Friedland moved to Perth in 2009 and is now a proud West Australian.

He is Garnett Passe & Rodney Williams Memorial Foundation Chair in Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery, University of Western Australia, and a consultant at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital and Joondalup Health Campus. He is also a professor at Notre Dame University.

And he has well and truly met Mandela’s parting request.

He has run ENT clinics in northern WA, runs a clinic at Derbarl Yerrigan Aboriginal Health Service and mentors Aboriginal students.

He started hearing testing services at Joondalup Health Campus with Telethon Speech & Hearing.

“Together with TSH, we

are providing hearing screening and testing at Banksia Hill juvenile detention centre,” he said.

“I am also trying to set up regular ENT specialist visits and treatment for the children with hearing loss at this facility.”

He has also collaborated in research with Telethon Kids Institute on chronic middle ear disease in children.

Proceeds from the book in South Africa are going to hearing charity High Hopes, and in Australia to Derbarl Yerrigan in Perth.

Quiet Time With The President: A Doctor’s Story About Learning To Listen, by Peter Friedland, with Jill Margo, is available from August 5.



Peter Friedland and Nelson Mandela.

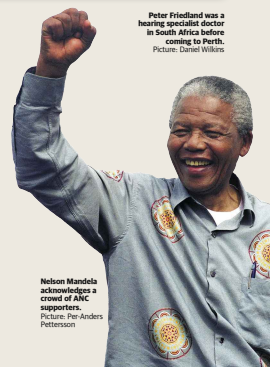


He always said he doesn’t believe that people are born hating, they have learnt to hate. And if you have learnt to hate you can learn to love.

Peter Friedland



Peter Friedland was a hearing specialist doctor in South Africa before coming to Perth. Picture: Daniel Wilkins



Nelson Mandela acknowledges a crowd of ANC supporters. Picture: Per-Anders Pettersen