

# Activists mourn and celebrate Mama Winnie



**RESPECTS:** Shane Maharaj, Sinthie Qono, Swaminathan Gounden, Ramesh Harcharan, Rags Rampersad and Ravi Pillay were among the crowd that gathered to pay tribute to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, pictured below.

## ARUSHAN NAIDOO

THE NATIONAL flag and the tri-colour of the ANC flapped in the wind on Monday evening, knocking out the rows of candles at what once was Durban Central Prison.

At the Inkosi Albert Luthuli International Convention Centre, passionate tributes and tear-jerking memories were shared at a vigil at the site's Human Rights Wall for Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

Her close relationships with activists in the Indian community were very apparent.

Comrades and friends gathered to lay flowers and pictures in tribute to a Struggle icon very much the political equal of her late ex-husband, Nelson Mandela.

The strongest of these was with Fatima and Ismail Meer.

Ramesh Harcharan worked closely with both women for over two decades on projects that included the authorised biography of *Madiba, Higher Than Hope*.

He described how they would send activists out of the country through underground structures. Madikizela-Mandela would ask Fatima to organise scholarships in India so young activists could acquire key skills for a future democratic country.

"We took Mama Winnie to the flats in Chatsworth and she cried at the sight of poverty there," said Harcharan.

Human Settlements and Public Works MEC Ravi Pillay described the late stalwart as an "indomitable spirit" and recalled her visit with activists in Port Shepstone at the height of apartheid in the early 1980s.

He also referred to her gender activism and role in "deepening unity and non-racialism".

Returned exile Dr Sithie Qono and her daughter Zandile paid tribute, describing her as having been "an old guard of South Africa".

Ninety-year old veteran of the ANC, Natal Indian Congress and South African Communist Party, Swaminathan Gounden spent several hours at the vigil and reflected on a long comradeship that spanned over 60 years.

Struggle stalwart Mac Maharaj, who was among the first to arrive at the vigil with members



of the South Africa in the Making committee, said Madikizela-Mandela represented "the nobility for human freedom and human frailties".

Yashica Padia of the Active Citizen's Movement said after laying a wreath at the makeshift shrine: "As a single mother she often faced the humiliation and fear of many midnight raids to her home which sometimes resulted in her arrest in the presence of her two young children.

"Her banning orders also prevented her movement outside her neighbourhood which forced her to leave her job as a social worker. She remained active and organised support for political prisoners, and kept the spirit of the banned ANC alive during those years."

In 1976, Madikizela-Mandela was imprisoned at the Johannesburg Fort with women activists that included Meer and Jeanne Noel of Sydenham. Earlier in 1969, she was detained in solitary confinement with Shanthie Naidoo of the political family that included her brother, the Robben Island prisoner, Indres.

In spite of torture, Shanthie refused to give evidence against Madikizela-Mandela and journalist Joyce Sikhakhane, telling the judge she had two friends among the accused: "I don't want to give evidence because I will not be able to live with my conscience if I do."

## *Tributes pour in...*

**Ela Gandhi:** "The sudden passing away of Comrade Winnie came as a shock and left a hollow feeling in me. She was a tower of strength to many of us over the years and I believe future generations will derive strength and inspiration from this legacy of sheer resilience and courage."

**Businessman Vivian Reddy:** "Mama Winnie, a close friend and confidant, will be remembered as someone who believed that perseverance prevails when all else failed. Her consistent bravery and courage against the worst oppression is legendary. She will be sadly missed as we regarded Mama as a member of our family."

**Film producer Anant Singh:** "She was a remarkable woman who kept the flame of the liberation Struggle burning in South Africa while Madiba and his comrades were in prison. She endured the brunt of the apartheid regime's harshness at its worst. Her courage and determination was unwavering. She

truly lived up to the title of 'Mother of the Nation.'"

**MF leader Shameen Thakur Rajbansi:** "Rightfully hailed the Mother of the Nation, Mama Winnie displayed traits of humility, love and compassion. Her dedication to the struggle against the apartheid regime and the countless altruistic sacrifices she made for the freedom of South Africans will forever echo in the annals of our history. Ma' Mandela showed grit and extreme courage during very trying times, her resilience is praiseworthy indeed. As a nation we mourn the death of a noble veteran whose life and legacy has impacted us all in magnanimous ways. Sadly, her death comes at a time when South Africa requires strong 'women leadership' which she so eagerly and fiercely exhibited. The world will grieve the passing of a true 'African Leader' who, although challenged by controversy, stayed the course in pursuing a better life for ALL South Africans."