

Hamilton celebrates Mandela in music-filled memorial

'We are not here to cry or mourn,' sang one performer

By Cory Ruf

CBC Hamilton

Dec 14, 2013

Singing into a lectern at Hamilton's city hall, Bashir Ismail howls a heartfelt tune he'd penned just the night before.

"We are not here to cry or mourn," the 55-year-old belts, half-improvising the melody. "We are here to cheer your life."

Though the song, delivered without a hint of nervousness, is brand new, its refrain — "Mandela!" — is perfectly familiar to the more than 100 people in attendance. They packed into council chambers on Saturday morning to celebrate the life of Nelson Mandela. The former South African president and a titan of the country's anti-Apartheid movement, he died on Dec. 5 at the age of 95.

Musical, multicultural and brimming with messages of hope and peace, the memorial service inside council chambers reflected both the diversity of Hamilton and the broadness of Mandela's appeal.

"We would be remiss if we didn't take time as a community to come together to reflect on the contribution that this giant of a man made," said Evelyn Myrie, the executive director of the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion and one of the event's organizers, in her introduction. "This was a life well-lived."

Beginning with a short blessing from Hamilton First Nations leader Walter Cook, the memorial service saw prayers from religious leaders representing several faiths.

Hamilton politicians Mayor Bob Bratina, NDP MP David Christopherson and provincial cabinet minister Ted McMeekin also took the mic to commemorate Mandela.

In a short speech, Christopherson spoke of being in the same room as Mandela during a trip to South Africa. He said the experience made him proud to be Canadian. Canada, under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, was one of the first Western nations to call for an end to Apartheid, he noted.

"I was proud to stand there as a Canadian knowing that we at least played a small role in the great journey of this legend of a man," Christopherson said.

The ceremony, which lasted nearly two-and-a-half hours, also featured the testimony of South Africans who experienced the horrors of Apartheid.

Rev. Abiel Khalema, now a minister in Toronto with the United Church of Canada, grew up in Soweto, the township in Johannesburg that became a global symbol for the oppression of blacks in pre-democracy South Africa.

He recalled how Mandela's message of forgiveness helped him, bit by bit, overcome the pain and emotional turmoil he suffered as a result of being tortured by police.

"Revenge is when you drink poison in hopes that someone else will die," Khalema said, invoking a famous Mandela quote. "Forgiveness goes a long way. It heals you. It makes you strong. And that is why Nelson Mandela was so powerful."

This theme of transcendence — of overcoming trauma, bitter racial divisions, even death itself — was channeled in the memorial's many musical numbers.

Hamilton labour activist Lyla Miklos sang a rollicking rendition of John Lennon's Power to the People. Later on, United Church minister Seiichi Ariga delivered a wistful flute solo. Additionally, Tselane Mokuena, consul-general of South Africa in Toronto, led the audience in a traditional South African chant in the middle of her address.

Her compatriots in the crowd — several of whom wore the distinctive colours of South Africa's flag — rose to join her, dancing while they sang.

The music continued even after the ceremony concluded. Drummers pounded out tribal-esque rhythms while attendees gathered in the foyer to discuss Mandela's legacy over coffee, tea and Caribbean-style soft drinks.

Moipone Mlotshwa, who was born in South Africa but has lived in Hamilton for two decades, said she was "touched" by the outpouring of emotion she saw at Saturday's ceremony.

"It's a blessing that Hamilton recognizes Mandela."

Despite the African leader's death, his message of forgiveness and racial harmony, Mlotshwa added, lives on — in Hamilton and around the world.

"We should be one people," she said. "The whole world should be together."