

TRIBUTE

Remembering David Webster one year later

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At approximately 12.00 pm on May Day 1989, I heard the news that Dave Webster had been shot. Nearly an hour later his shooting was confirmed and I was also informed he was dead. "Impossible" was the only word that rang true to me. Dave Webster could not die. He was too much part of life. He was too much part of progressive life in South Africa. He was too much part of mine, my friends and colleagues' history. Dave had been around when we were in the student movement. He was one of the few academics we could consult. His dedication, loyalty, gentleness, knowledge and expertise ensured that we were at his door frequently. He listened for many hours of his life to our worries and plans. In time David became a role model for how we would like to be when we graduated. He probably never realised the influence and impact he had on us then and how he influenced a whole generation of students and student leaders.

My personal contact with David remained long after I left the student movement. And by 1985 I was again seeing David often. Now in connection with the Organisation of Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSA). By then David was central in the Detainees Parents Support Committee (DPSC) working with both zest and calm. Looking back, there seems to be so few occasions that I remember David voicing complaints, despite the pressure of his work. For those in OASSA at the time, David was there to assist and help in our attempts to initiate projects and structures. He did not need persuading in seeing the value of mental health services.

Since he took subjectivity and the personal plight of all humanity seriously, his interest in psychology was obvious. Furthermore David had a keen interest in psychotherapy, particularly regarding its application to torture victims.

David's great strength was seeing himself beyond his membership of a particular organisation. His vision was always broad. For David, dedication to a new transformed South Africa meant all progressive organisations and individuals were important. Much of (Transvaal) OASSA's development and the work of the Detainees Counselling Service in the Transvaal can be attributed to his support and encouragement.

David Webster was a man of integrity. His words were truthful. Never once did he involve himself in rumour mongering or petty bickering. His sense of self and commitment to political struggle was too secure for that. In articulating his views he always left room for debate. His dedication to justice and human rights was total. On these issues there could be no compromises for him. Never once did I hear Dave not challenge a racist remark for strategic reasons.

David Webster was not a cynic - his patience and love of people were too great. If you needed time, he found it. I remember the numerous people at David's funeral who said the same thing. How he managed to find the time and not show his exasperation with myself and all those who consulted him, still remains a puzzle. It is even more perplexing considering his work as an anthropologist, his political activism, his dedication to social history, involvement in sport and music and his love of the outdoors particularly if they were away from Johannesburg.

The current revelations of the Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB) make David's death even more tragic. Besides the successful assassinations documented, there are numerous reports of botched operations. Gavin Evans, End Conscription Campaign (ECC) activist and Weekly Mail reporter, escaped being murdered (the plan was to stab him and make it appear as if it was done by burglars) because the death squad's agents had his wrong address. David like so many others both inside and outside the country were not so fortunate. There was no mistaking his death, his slim body riddled with bullets outside his Troyeville home and in front of Maggie Friedman - the woman he loved and with whom he shared his life.

David Webster's assassination occurred a few months before the De Klerk government's reform initiatives. He would have dearly loved to have been an open member of the African National Congress. David's contribution to the development of a new South Africa will never be forgotten. We should also never forget how much more he could have given to our country and how much we need him. Holding the memory will mean his killers (whoever and

wherever they are) will never escape our anger. It will mean our tears will never fully pass. For those of us in the world of psychology who were fortunate enough to know him, his life provides us with a continual challenge to our everyday conduct. David's life tells us that we do have a responsibility to confront the evil and the harsh, but that we should never forget our humour and take pleasure in the parts of our world which are filled with goodness.

We must never forget.