AWESOME stories

NELSON MANDELA

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In this image of Nelson Mandela, from the Google Mandela Archive, we see how Mandela appeared in 1941. Public Domain, via Google Mandela Archive.

Born on the 18th of July, 1918, Mandela entered the world at a time when millions were leaving it. As the Spanish-Flu pandemic ravaged country after country, he was born in Mvezo - a small village located near the Mbashe River in a part of South Africa known then as the Transkei.

His parents (Gadla "Henry" Mphakanyiswa and Nosekeni "Fanny") spoke Xhosa and called their baby boy “Rolihlahla.” That name has two meanings. Literally translated, it is “pulling the branch of a tree,” but colloquially it means “troublemaker.” No one called him Nelson until a teacher - Miss Mdingane - gave him that name on his first day of school.

Growing up in a hut in the village of Qunu (where Mandela has a retirement home), the young boy viewed nature as his playground. The land itself provided what he needed for toys. Rolihlahla and his friends turned large, smooth rocks - found in the hills above his village - into roller coasters and transformed tree branches into oxen-drawn sleighs.

No one in Mandela’s family had ever attended school, but one day two of Fanny’s friends suggested that her son - a clever child - should be the first. When his father agreed, seven-year-old Rolihlahla had to exchange his normal clothes (a blanket wrapped around one shoulder with a pin at the waist) for school clothes (a cut-off pair of his father’s trousers with a cinching string at the waist).

In school, young Nelson received a British education. At the time, African subjects - and culture - were not part of the school curriculum.

Two years later, Nelson went through a life-changing experience when his father died. Beyond the pain of that loss, there was more. Fanny decided her son would leave Qunu, so all he had previously known in his life would be left behind.

What Nelson did not know then, was that Jongintaba - a highly respected man who served as regent - had offered to become the child’s guardian. For the next years of his life, Nelson would live in Mqhekezweni.

In his new school, Mandela studied history, geography, English and Xhosa. From his adopted father, he learned about democracy-in-action. He closely listened to chiefs as they told stories about African patriots fighting against Western domination. Paying attention to Chief Joyi, the growing boy learned that tribal fellowship had been shattered when foreign white people arrived.

At sixteen, Mandela learned another life lesson. In the Xhosa tradition, a boy becomes a man when he is circumcised. When it happened to him, Nelson learned that boys may cry but “a man conceals his pain.” (Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, page 28.)

After his circumcision, Mandela was sent to Clarkebury Boarding Institute in the Engcobo district. It was not for

him, noted the regent, “to spend your life mining the white man’s gold, never knowing how to write your name.” At Clarkebury - a Thembu college - Nelson learned another significant lesson. Although he was descended from a royal line, so were other people:

> *I quickly realized that I had to make my way on the basis of my ability, not my heritage. Most of my classmates could outrun me on the playing field and outthink me in the classroom, and I had a good deal of catching up to do.*

Catching up - like many other things in his life - was something Nelson Mandela embraced. Continuing to do well with his studies, he became a student at the University College of Fort Hare.

At this prestigious institution, he met Oliver Tambo (his future law partner). And ... at Fort Hare ... he begin to personally experience the profound injustice which follows when one person has too much authority over another.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/NELSON-MANDELA-Invictus

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/NELSON-MANDELA-Invictus

Media Stream

Mandela - Birth Hut

Image online, courtesy Robben Island Mayibuye Archives.
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Mandela - Born in Transkei

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Mandela - Home in Qunu

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Mandela - Engcobo District

Map online, courtesy Accommodations Now of South Africa.
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Mandela - University College Fort Hare

Photo of Fort Hare from W. E. B. Du Bois Photographs: African Photographs. Online, courtesy University of Massachusetts at Amherst.
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Oliver Tambo

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NELSON MANDELA

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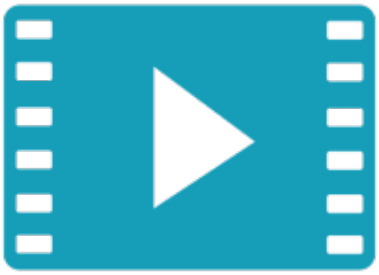

Xhosa - How it Sounds

Video by Barrennada, online courtesy Barrennada's Channel at YouTube.

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