

Stephen Bantu Biko (1946-1977) was a South African anti-apartheid activist who died, under suspicious circumstances, while in police custody.

While arguing against the restrictions imposed by South Africa's government on people of color, Biko convinced an initially sceptical white journalist - Donald Woods (1933-2001) - that the plight of black South Africans under apartheid was truly deplorable.

After Steve's death, Woods wrote a book to memorialize his friend - entitled *Cry Freedom* - and gave interviews about their friendship.

This clip - a rare interview of Steve Biko (reportedly from German television) - features his ideas on the anti-apartheid struggle.

What do we know about the life of the man whom people often call the "Father of Black Consciousness?"

Although Steve Biko initially wanted to become a medical doctor, somewhere along his educational path he determined that he could help more people by being an activist than a physician.

Born on the 18th of December, in 1946, Biko attended primary and secondary school at Marianhill (a missionary school in King William's Town, in KwaZulu-Natal).

It was the era of South African apartheid, so when he decided to become a doctor, Biko had to attend the Black Section of the Medical School of the University of Natal. He started the program in 1966.

Within two years, however, Steve found that he was more interested in examining issues of the day than examining patients in a medical office. To address the particular needs of black students, he and his colleagues founded the South African Students' Organisation (SASO).

Steve was elected as SASO's first president.

Contributing to the roots of SASO was this question: Who is better able to help black South-African students resist the discriminatory environment in which they live - white liberals or black students? This became known as the "best able debate."

Among the debate issues were topics like these:

- Should black students be spectators or participants in the political world?
- Should black students resist the policies of apartheid?
- Should black students leave decisions about their lives in South African to others (including liberal whites)?
- Should black students believe they are inferior to whites?
- Why were so many black students passive about their role in life?

Authorities running the country did not appreciate Steve Biko's approach to change in South Africa. They particularly did not appreciate the impact that his message was having throughout the country (and beyond South Africa's borders).

By August of 1977 - when Biko was only 30 years old - his days were numbered. The Steve Biko Foundation tells us what happened to him following his arrest on August 18:

*In his short but remarkable life, Biko was frequently harassed and detained under the country's notorious security legislation. This interrogation culminated in his arrest, together with his colleague and comrade Peter Cyril Jones, at a Police roadblock outside of King William's Town on the 18th August 1977.*

*Biko and Jones were tortured at the headquarters of the Security Division housed in what was then known as the Sanlam building in Port Elizabeth. It was during this period that Biko sustained massive brain hemorrhage.*

*On the 11th of September 1977 Biko was transported to Pretoria central prison – a twelve-hour journey, naked, without medical escort, in the back of a police Land Rover. Biko died on the floor of an empty cell in Pretoria Central Prison on the 12th of September. It was in this way that South Africa was robbed of one of its foremost political thinkers.*

*Biko became officially the 46th victim of torture and death under the State Security Laws. His death helped highlight the brutality of South African security laws to the international community and the general plight of South Africans. It led directly to the decision by Western countries to support the UN Security Council vote to ban arms sales to South Africa (Resolution 418 of 4 November 1977).*

Perhaps recognizing that he might not personally complete the journey to equality, Steve Biko wrote these words:

*We have set out on a quest for true humanity and somewhere in the distance we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth drawing strength from our common plight and brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon Africa the greatest gift possible, a more human face.*

About eighteen years after Biko's death, Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first black President. Under his leadership, there was no civil war. Under his leadership, people came to understand that reconciliation can happen without violence.

In 2001, Professor Zakes Mda discussed the legacy of Steve Biko in a memorial lecture. He observed that sometimes courageous people do not personally benefit from the results of their leadership. To make the point, he likened Steve Biko to a well-digger:

*In Sesotho there is a saying: "motjheka sediba ha a se nwe" ("he who digs a well does not drink from it"). Only those who come after him will quench their thirst from its cool water.*

*When the forebears formulated this adage, they had Bantu Steve Biko in mind, even as he sat in the world of pre-creation waiting to be created.* (Professor Zakes Mda, "Biko's Children," 2001 Steve Biko Memorial Lecture.)

Today we still remember Steve Biko for his courage and willingness to risk his own life to better the lives of others in South Africa.

Credits:

Clip of Steve Biko, online courtesy YouTube.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Stephen-Biko-Rare-Interview>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Stephen-Biko-Rare-Interview>