

NEIL AGGETT
(1953 -1982)



LIVED FOR
HIS COUNTRY
DIED IN DETENTION

Neil Aggett was born in Kenya in 1953. He was the son of a Kenyan farming family. He was the youngest child, having an older brother and sister.

In 1963, when Neil was ten years old, the family left Kenya in the wake of the disturbances in that country. The family settled in the Cape.

Neil went to Kingswood College, a private school in Grahamstown in the Cape. He was a boarder there for his entire school career. He was a bright student, and had an excellent academic record. He matriculated at the age of seventeen. In his matric year he was made a prefect, and was regarded so highly that he was made prefect in charge of the junior section of the school.

He went directly from school to Medical School at the University of Cape Town. He lived in residence for a year and then moved into "digs".

It was during his medical school years that Neil became more socially aware. He became concerned about the factors which cause disease, and not merely how to treat those diseases. He became editor of a medical student magazine, and gave prominence to the idea and practice of community medicine.

In 1974 Neil started living with his girlfriend Elizabeth Floyd, who was also studying medicine. They rejected the lifestyle of most white South Africans, and chose to live together in a labourer's cottage in Constantia, with no electricity or hot water.

Neil graduated in 1976. For the first six months of his internship he went to Umtata Hospital in the Transkei. He made many friends there and maintained contact with them for the rest of his life.

He then moved to Johannesburg and did the second six months of his internship at Thembisa Hospital.

Neil became involved in the proposal for a medical scheme to be initiated by the trade unions. He proposed to the Metal and Allied Workers Union that they start a medical scheme for their members. However, the executives of the union rejected the scheme as they felt it would detract from day-to-day issues.

In 1977 Neil began working at Baragwanath Hospital as a Casualty Officer for four nights a week. At the same time he became involved in the Industrial Aid Society, where he dealt with health complaints of workers. He became an expert on workmens' compensation problems.

He was not satisfied with this work as he felt the most important step toward change in South Africa was to build worker organisations. Towards the end of 1978 he became involved in the African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU).

He played an important part in the AFCWU, helping to set up an active branch in the Transvaal. He was very dedicated to his work, and won the respect of all the people he worked with.

He also helped to set up the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) in the Transvaal.

Neil felt that the black trade union movement was divided and worked to establish unity between the unions.

Neil was a shy and gentle person, with a serious approach to life. He was hardworking and would go out of his way to do things for others. He enjoyed camping and hiking in his spare time. He also spent his leisure time reading and listening to African jazz music, especially Dollar Brand.

Neil was detained on the morning of the 26th of November

1981 under Section 22 of the General Laws Amendment Act, which allows a detainee to be held for 14 days. He was then re-detained under Section 6 of the Internal Security Act, which entitles the police to hold a detainee in solitary confinement indefinitely.

Liz Floyd was also detained on the 26th November 1981. She was released after 5 months on the 26th March with 7 other detainees. More than 180 people are still in detention.

Neil Aggett died in detention on Friday 5th February 1982.

The body of the Imam Abdullah Haron had 26 separate bruises on its front, back and side. A police officer testified that Haron had fallen down stairs.

A pathologist testified that some bruises were older than others and not all could have been caused by the fall. The official finding was that Haron had died of heart failure, brought on in part by his fall.