

# SAVE ROBERT McBRIDE

Interview by Justice and Service with Mrs Doris McBride, Robert's Mother

*Can you please give us a background of your son's upbringing?*

Robert's upbringing is not unlike the upbringing of many of the other black children. Because they are born into the Apartheid system, they are all brought up in the same way. In our home my husband was the one who was always involved in politics, I mean in the politics of the oppressed. Robert grew up in that atmosphere. He was always able to hear the discussions between my husband and friends, how they were not satisfied with the set-up in South Africa. Robert was always one for asking questions. Durban is a beautiful sea-side town. Sometimes we took the children along the beachfront. They saw other children, white children, playing on the beach, jumping in the water with swings and all sorts of things, a really nice playground. Our children said they wanted to go in there too, to play on the swings. How do you tell your child that he cannot go in there? So you have to tell the child at a very early age that because you are black, you cannot go in there.

In South Africa a black man does not earn the same salary as a white man. It does not matter if you have the same qualifications. You do not get the same money. Robert grew up with that knowledge that his father was one of the best workers on the site, he was actually a foreman at the oil refinery they were building. If something went wrong his father would always be sent for. In a normal society that child would have been proud of his father. They used to bring young white men to my husband or other black foremen and say, you are in charge of these young men, you have to train them. The most hurting part is that you are teaching this young man and he earns more money than you do. So he has no respect for you.

That is the background Robert grew up in. Inferior pay for blacks, inferior housing and at school, there are no books. The children come home and say, Mummy, I need an exercise book or text book. Then you must still take from this little salary and buy books for the child. White children get these things free, they are never short of anything. When he was at high school it was again a question of not having books. He and some other children organised a boycott of classes. There were two high schools in our area and they were a distance from each other. So the children decided to walk and meet at a certain point with other students and discuss what action to take. On their way to the other high school they met the police force. The police just stuck in and started hitting them. The girls ran into a baby clinic to hide. The police threw teargas into that baby clinic and one baby died that day from the fumes of the teargas.

This black baby died and nobody bothered. The police did not bother and nothing was done. The baby was just left. Nothing came of the case because they tell you they were carrying out their duties. As far as I can see that's when Robert changed and he became now more concerned and more active in the student movement. He then went to a teacher training college. He was in his last year when the students organised a boycott. They were suspended from writing exams and they missed their examinations at the end of the year. We parents again had to take out our bits of money to get lawyers to get our children back to write exams. They refused that the children write exams. We carried on with the case and in March the following year they allowed them to write exams.

It was Robert's last year at college. Then he was supposed to go to University, but because of the lateness of the writing of exams he got his results late and had already missed a few months of the University year. He then said, "I am not going to University this year. I am going to do



something else. I have some other work to do." He was then referring to joining Umkonto we Sizwe but we did not know. He had already met and linked up with some other young men whom he knew and I think its where it really began.

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**In April 1987, a young South African Freedom Fighter, Robert McBride, was sentenced to death. His message from the dock:**

**"Freedom is just around the corner"**

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*What was your attitude to his political involvement?*

I was afraid for him because I had heard what could happen to him or what had happened to other young men. When it came to the real thing and I knew, I could understand.

Afterwards I totally agreed with what he did, what my husband did. I supported them as much as I could. Although it was policy with them to keep us out. They did not discuss things in front of us. They explained to us that it was to safeguard us because if we did not know anything the police could not beat anything out of us.

*How has Robert taken his sentence?*

Robert is very strong, he concerns himself a lot with other people actually.

Its through him that we hear when someone has been executed. He always tells us what to do. Get hold of the Human Rights groups and tell them that so and so has received his execution orders. Of course it must worry him that any day now it might be his turn. Will there be someone there to tell us when his orders come? Because the execution orders are given to the prisoner himself. He has seven days after that before he is hanged and there is not much time.

*How are you and the family taking it?*

It is not easy for us but we have told ourselves that it is a time of sacrifice. Robert gave us encouragement in court when he was sentenced. He turned and looked at the gallery where we were standing. He said to us, and some young men who were standing with us, "Freedom is just around the corner. I have gone just as far as the corner. Now it is your turn to go around the corner. The struggle continues." Then he went. We were proud of him. He still showed defiance inspite of the fact that he was sentenced to death three times.

You can imagine they were watching to see what our reaction would be. We knew that we could not give them the satisfaction of seeing what we really felt. So we stood there and also said to Robert, "the struggle continues." He had asked us to be brave. In fact we had an idea of what the sentence would be, because once you are an ANC member you do not stand a chance. They sentence you to death without doubt.

*What has been the reaction of the community to Robert's sentence?*

The community has been very helpful. We went to the churches. They all drew up petitions and signed them. People who did not speak to us before now speak to us.

Now that my husband and son are not at home, there are jobs my daughters and I cannot fix. We never have to ask for long.

*South Africa is reported to be having one of the highest hanging or execution rates in the world. What role do you think the international community has in curbing this?*

They could actually have an impact by vigorously lobbying and putting pressure on the South African government to stop those politically motivated executions. The apartheid system is the one responsible for people to do what they do.

*What would you like to say to other mothers who have sons or daughters on death row?*

The best thing is to take courage from your child because he or she stands for all of us. We should not feel regret, although it is easy to feel that way because the system strips you of everything you have and you end up with nothing. Noone wants to employ you. I was a teacher but I was fired, I now do not have any employment. Friends may turn against you. The best thing to do is to look forward to and try to think of ways how to help your child. Try not to show your heartache because you have to show that what your child did was worthwhile. Do not cry behind your children because you will make them feel guilty. ●

## NO APARTHEID EXECUTIONS