For many years, an old LP recording of a speech by Robert Kennedy in Cape Town in 1966 lay around our family home. I never realised its significance until I saw RFK in the Land of Apartheid – A Ripple of Hope at the opening night of the Encounters International Documentary Film Festival in Cape Town this week.
On the family shelves since June 1966

In June 1966, US Senator Robert Kennedy paid a five-day visit to South Africa during the height of the apartheid regime. As the film by Larry Shore and Tami Gold illustrates, apartheid was to endure for a further 28 years, and Robert Kennedy’s visit was in some ways no more than a mere irritation to the then omnipotent and supremely arrogant National Party Government. In fact, the assassination of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd just three months later gave the apartheid regime a lot more to worry about and soon overshadowed Kennedy’s visit.

However, as many who heard Kennedy in 1966 attest in the film, his speeches in Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Durban and Johannesburg, and his visits to Groutville to meet banned ANC leader Chief Albert Luthuli and to Soweto, served to provide a tiny ‘ray of light’ in what was then a long dark apartheid tunnel.

In particular, Kennedy’s Day of Affirmation ‘Ripple of Hope’ speech in Jameson Hall at the University of Cape Town on 06 June 1966, which forms part of his epitaph at his grave at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC, continues to resonate strongly:

“It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Quote from Kennedy’s Day of Affirmation speech in Cape Town in June 1966 at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington

His opening remarks were also a masterstroke:
"I come here this evening because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage. I refer, of course, to the United States of America."

My father, Dr Alex Boraine, played a role in Kennedy’s visit to South Africa at the time. He describes the circumstances in his 2008 autobiography A Life in Transition:

“One of the highlights of our time in America was a meeting with Martin Luther King. I had been asked to try and persuade him to travel to Cape Town on behalf of the student representative councils at both the universities of Cape Town and Natal. I managed to get an appointment to see him when he visited Drew (University) to deliver a major speech. I listened to him with awe. He was an amazing orator, with a deep understanding of violence and non-violence. I met with him for a brief half-hour and urged him to go to South Africa. His reply was swift and strong: ‘I have too much to do in my own country. I cannot leave. But you must go back to your country, because there is much work to be done there.’

The second choice of speaker was JFK’s younger brother Bobby, and again I was one of those asked to approach him. Through a contact in the US Democratic Party, I managed to see Kennedy in Washington for all of seven minutes. When I put the request to him, he replied, ‘what difference can I make?’

‘You can give young South Africans hope and courage,’ I responded. When he did visit South Africa in June 1966, he did just that."

Robert Kennedy’s simple grave at Arlington National Cemetery. He was assassinated in California on 06 June 1968, exactly two years after his ‘Ripple of Hope’ speech at UCT.

Does Robert Kennedy’s visit to South Africa in 1966 have anything more than curiosity value today? It’s fascinating to see the old footage, which serves as a reminder of the horrors and absurdities of apartheid South Africa. It’s also interesting to note that by today’s standards in US politics, Robert Kennedy would probably be labelled left wing.

But it his insistence that one person can make a difference that remains an important message for all of us today. Maybe this is exactly what is being echoed by the current Lead SA campaign when it says:

“Through the small steps of individuals the nation will improve and prosper. The ability to change your life and your country is in your hands. Rather than feeling helpless, Lead SA encourages you to feel hopeful about your future and play an active part in unlocking the potential of your country. South Africa is filled with passionate people and the nation’s achievements are endless, but we need you to use your leadership potential and move the nation forward.”

Listen to Robert Kennedy’s ‘Ripple of Hope ’speech

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