‘Ripple of hope that Kennedy brought to SA

The young US Senator’s visit sparked expectations that he would champion the fight against apartheid, say those who remember the event. Helen Bamford reports

N 1966 when Dr Hendrick Verwoerd was Prime Minister of South Africa and Dr Martin Luther King was fighting for civil rights in the US, Robert F Kennedy came to South Africa to deliver the Nusas Annual Day of Affirmation Speech at the University of Cape Town’s Jameson Hall.

The senator for New York, younger brother of the late US president John F Kennedy, delivered his famous “Ripple of Hope” speech, widely regarded as the greatest of his life. A quotation from it is on his grave at the Arlington National Cemetery in Washington DC.

Kennedy drew comparisons between the US’s civil rights movement and South Africa’s struggle for freedom, which in 1966 didn’t go down very well with the government at the time.

The historic visit has been captured in a documentary RFR in the Land of Apartheid: A Ripple of Hope directed by Tumi Gold and Lurcy Shore, which will be screened as part of the Encounters Film Festival this month.

It follows Kennedy and his wife Ethel on a tour of the country which included a visit to then-banned president of the ANC, Chief Albert Luthuli.

He also went into opposition township homes in Soweto – something unheard of at the time – and spoke at the universities of Witwatersrand, Natal and Stellenbosch.

Margaret H Marshall, now Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, was vice-president of Nusas at the time and travelled with Kennedy from Johannesburg to Cape Town to Durban and back to Johannesburg.

She told Weekend Argus that the visit was “a ray of light during a very dark, oppressive time in South Africa”.

Innes joined Nusas and was elected to the vice-presidency of the UCT SRC. His liberal colleagues and I were harassed by the security police and I had my passport removed which prevented me from taking up an overseas scholarship, the Abe Bailey Bursary. But we didn’t care because we were going to sit back and allow the UCT Council to withdraw the appointment of a black lecturer (Archie Madge) because the apartheid government told them to,” Innes said.

Innes said it was a time of heightened political idealism. He said this feeling of hope escalated when Kennedy began his campaign for the presidency of the US, meeting in 1966, that Kennedy had been assassinated.”

Satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, a student at UCT at the time although not in the crowd to hear Kennedy, said he had a vivid memory of the opening paragraph of his speech.

He spoke about South Africa: “I thought the poverty, the highs and lows – and then it turned out to be about the USA. Maybe the first time I was the audience to political satire.”

Stan Kahn was the student press liaison officer for the event in 1966 when Kennedy came to UCT and handed out copies of the speech to the press.

“I stood just below the stage, in front of it, in among the reporters in Jameson Hall, for the duration of the speech and remember it so clearly.

Kahn met Kennedy and his wife Ethel afterwards.

You wouldn’t believe the elation we felt in the face of the apartheid juggernaut, what with the crowds on the Jammie steps, the traffic jam on University Avenue, and the press the next day. “It was like a curtain being opened and letting some sunshine in – quite remarkable to look back at it from the perspective of 1966,” he recalls.

Former UCT student Jill (Birbeck) Joubert, who now lives in Johannesburg, was at the airport to greet the Kennedys.

“I still vividly remember Robert standing up on the running board of the vehicle, shading his eyes and looking towards Cape Town saying ‘Sag, this is a pretty city.’”

She said that back at UCT, students formed a guard of honour on the Jammie steps.

“We female students wore white dresses and academic gowns. I can still picture the Kennedys walking towards us, hands outstretched.”

Robert F Kennedy met Chief Albert Luthuli when he visited South Africa in 1966.