

'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

IN 1966 when Dr Hendrick Verwoerd was Prime Minister of South Africa and Dr Martin Luther King jun 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 *RFK in the Land of Apartheid: A Ripple of Hope* directed by Tami Gold and Larry 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 ordinary 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 Joburg to Cape Town to Durban and back to Joburg.

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

'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 which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance'

"His speeches, now considered some of his finest, gave renewed hope and inspiration to those of us who opposed apartheid.

"The senator's recognition of the standing of Chief Luthuli, and his visit to that great man, was a particularly important symbol of recognition of the significance of the African National Congress in the struggle for liberation."

Labour analyst Dr Duncan Innes recalls how Kennedy turned his life around.

He said that following his visit, liberal students on campuses throughout South Africa were suddenly galvanised into action whereas before they had been timid and wary.

Innes joined Nusas and was elected to the UCT SRC on a liberal platform.

"The following year I was elected president of the UCT SRC. My liberal colleagues and I were harassed by the security police and I had my passport removed which prevented me from taking up an overseas

"Our champion, we thought, the man who would support us and champion our cause, would soon be the president of the most powerful nation on earth.

"Sadly, it was not to be – and I still remember how stunned I felt when I was told, while chairing a Nusas

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 2010."

Kahn says that while in South Africa, Kennedy hired a plane from SAA that flew him and his entourage around the country.

"By the South African standards of the time it was an eye-opener," he recalls.

Former UCT student Jill (Birbeck) Joubert, who now lives in Joburg, 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 'Say, 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."

● The Encounters 12th South African documentary Festival starts in Cape Town on August 12 and in Joburg on August 18. Visit www.encounters.co.za for details of screenings.

scholarship, the Abe Bailey Bursary. But we didn't care because we now felt part of a global movement for freedom."

Innes said that the 1968 UCT sit-in also, in a sense, had its origins in Kennedy's visit.

"By this time I was Nusas president, and there was simply no way that we, as liberal student leaders, were going to sit back and allow the UCT Council to withdraw the appointment of a black lecturer (Archie Mafeje) because the apartheid government told them to."

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 1969, that Kennedy had been assassinated."

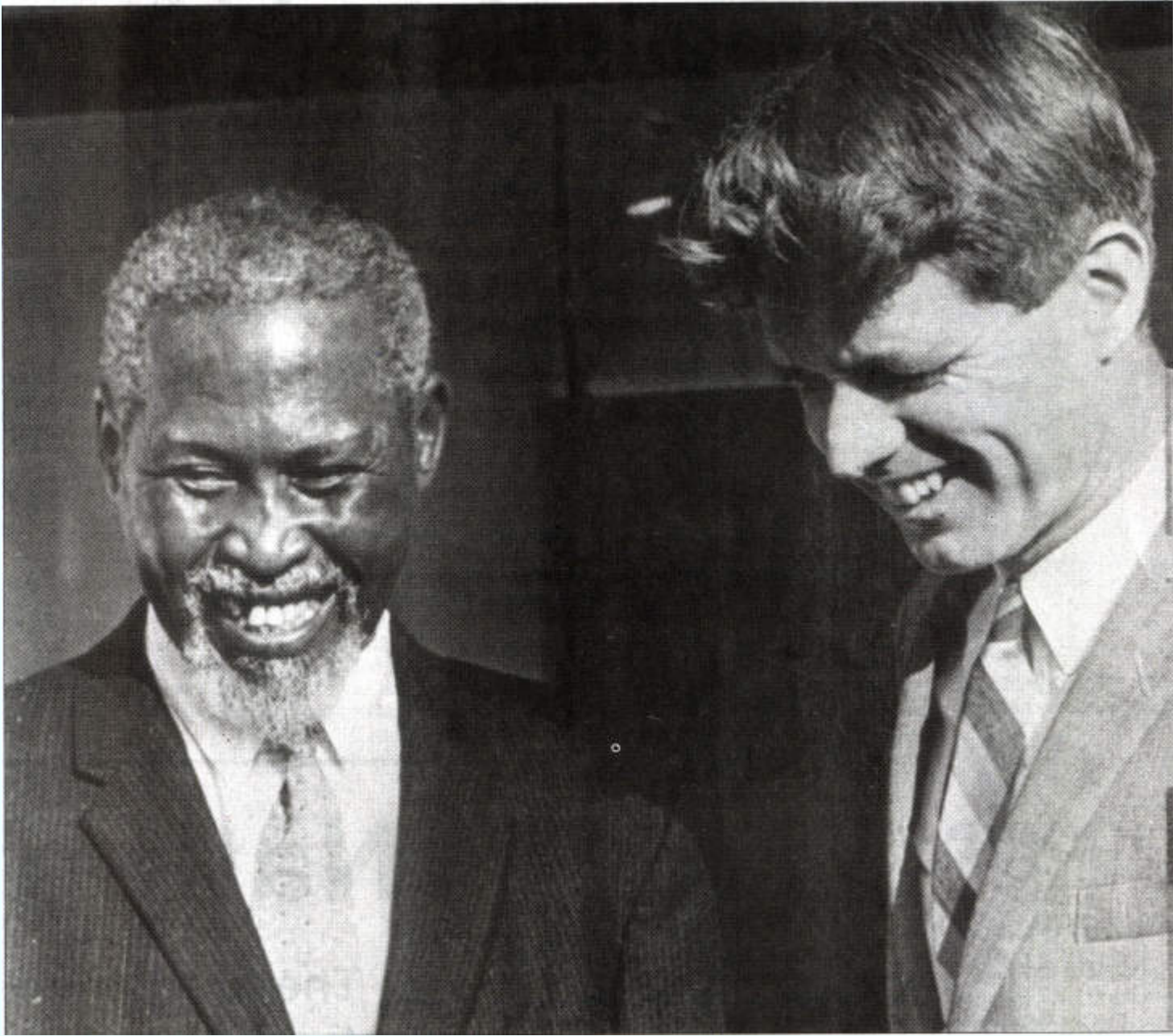
Satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, a student at UCT at the time although not in the crowd to hear Kennedy, said he had a vivid memory of the opening paragraph of his speech.

"He spoke about South Africa – I thought – the racism, 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





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

