



P.O.V.'s "Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela"

by Thomas Allen Harris

Tuesday, September 19, 2006 on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmaker's Statement

Bloemfontein

I arrived in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on January 14, 2002 for the funeral of my stepfather, B. Pule Leinaeng (Lee). It was my first time to Bloemfontein, a place I had grown up hearing about. Lee and I had a tumultuous relationship. For me this 31 hour trip from San Diego to Bloemfontein was more of an obligation – to support my mother and say goodbye to Lee.

What I experienced was not at all what I had expected. I felt as if I had come home. Everywhere I went people greeted me as Lee's eldest son and referred to him as my father. In Lee's home town, the concept of stepfather was an alien one. I painfully realized that I had come home too late to share it with the man who raised me. I was here to say goodbye to a father. Keeping myself behind my video camera was the only thing to hold back the unanticipated devastation of mourning.

During the six days of funeral services, testimonies, visits from friends and family, I learned more about Lee and how he had left South Africa with eleven other African National Congress colleagues to help build the ANC in exile. They were known as the Twelve who left Bloemfontein. Listening to the story of their exodus and exile, I was struck by the courage of these young men who left their close knit families to venture out into the unknown. It was a story I had heard before – as a child I used to listen as Lee shared reminiscences of home; the early years of the ANC's struggle to overturn Apartheid; how they left as a group and ended up Tanzania. But it was different now, hearing with adult ears the familiar stories, only now more expanded, with new details and deeper insights, from the men with whom he left.

The Bronx

Growing up in the United States during the 1970's, I was aware of the media portrayal of the ANC as a communist terrorist organization. It was many years before the name "Nelson Mandela" would become the global face of resistance to a brutal regime. Regarded as political agitators, Lee and my mother would jokingly warn me that our telephone was most likely tapped. Lee's mission to liberate South Africa seemed like an insurmountable challenge. As a child, I was torn. Each night I would pray to become invisible and fly to South Africa to fight the evil racists. Looking at a photograph of Lee and the eleven other men he left South Africa with, I imagined them to be Nelson Mandela's Twelve Disciples. At the same time, I could not bring myself to trust Lee. My biological father had been emotionally and physically abusive and after he and my

mother divorced, he abandoned my younger brother and me. I promised myself never to let another man hurt me the way my father had. Throughout my adolescent years, I rebelled against Lee, finding fault with his foreign customs, his bouts of depression and his drinking.

Bloemfontein

As Lee's comrades shared with me their own personal struggles with alienation, depression and homesickness during their 30 year exile, I gained an appreciation for the strength and stamina of these men and felt tremendous remorse for rejecting Lee as my father. I wanted to reconnect with him by way of the men who were bonded to him through a common political, historical and emotional journey.

It was only in the process of making this film that I realized just how much I was his son. He had come to the USA in 1967 to study journalism and become a political television journalist and thereby fulfill his mission to broadcast the message of the ANC to the world. I began my career as a television journalist producing public affairs programs on public television and from there went on to produce several personal documentary features – all of which used super-8mm film that Lee shot of our family during my childhood in the Bronx and Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania. This film is a labor of love, an attempt to reach beyond the realm of death, to claim a father that I had wanted but had rejected in life.

- Thomas Allen Harris

