

Firoz Patel
(Nithia Palani)

It was great sadness that we heard of Firoz “Fizo” Patel’s passing suddenly and unexpectedly on a Friday morning, 16 March 2018. There was deep shock at his unexpected death among his friends, colleagues, former students and education officials. It did not seem right that one who epitomized the concept of *carpe diem* should be taken from us at such a relatively young age. It is an immeasurable loss.



Ismail Vadi, Azhar Saloojee and Firoz Patel

Fizo and I were close friends since childhood. We grew up on the same street five houses apart. As young, high-spirited teenagers at Lenz High, Firoz and I could be classified as rebels without a cause. We often found ourselves in the office of the principal. I was suspended a couple of times, I am not sure how many times he was at the end of the wrath of the Deputy Principal, whom we called “Bulldog”. The former Deputy Minister of Education, Mr Enver Surty, a student at Lenz High, would testify to what the “Bulldog meant in his domain - nobody crosses the line.

After matric I was sent straight to work, completing invoices the whole day for a living. I hated it and soon left. Fizo applied to Wits for architecture but was not given Ministerial consent. So, we found ourselves outside my front gate contemplating what to do next. In February 1975, we decided to go to the college of Education in Fordsburg. We carried our high school antics into college, but we did well academically, captained the soccer and table tennis teams, and represented the college in badminton and volleyball. Whatever the sport, Fizo would play with gusto and passion. You would know when he was around. In all the madness at college, Fizo completed his Maths (1 and 2) and Stats (1 and 2) courses at Unisa while studying at college at the same time. God sends everybody

into the world with a gift to offer to the rest of humanity. Fizo was blessed with the gift of intelligence. He was the quiet scientific type, a thinker with ideas and with things.

At college, we found our state of social consciousness and agency. We were not just friends anymore but comrades. Together with “Jerry” Waja, Robert Abrahams, Yunus Ballim (the former Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Wits), “Hassie” Lorgat, and others, we started the Time-to-Learn Project. This project provided tuition to “Coloured” learners who were not allowed to attend “Indian” schools in Lenasia until they were reclassified Indian - racism in its ugliest form. We were arrested by the security police for our activism in Time-to-Learn and thrown in jail for a day at Protea Police Station. We often laughed about that day, remembering what Brigadier Heystack asked each one of us, “Who said we will make bonfires out of haystacks, you Indians think you are too clever!”

After graduating we separated paths for a few years. As fate would have it, we taught together after fifteen years at Lenasia South Secondary School. He was the Acting Principal, and I was the Head of a Department. During Firoz’s tenure at the school, with people like Dawn Naidoo and Robert Abrahams, the school emerged as one of the better high schools in Lenasia. Fizo was an active member of SADTU - Lenasia Branch where I served as Chairperson. He was also an active member of the ANC - Lenasia South Branch, where he resided at the time. Firoz was later promoted as the Deputy Head of the Lenasia Teachers’ Centre. Whilst here, he completed his Masters’ degree in education and passed it *cum laude*.

This position proved to be a turning point in his life. With the democratic transition in 1994, Firoz was asked to assist the first MEC for Education, Mary Metcalfe, with the establishment of the new provincial education department. He was renowned for his computer-related skills and was asked to set up a common admissions system for learners in Lenasia. Subsequently, he was seconded to Metcalfe’s office to establish the Education Management and Information Systems Directorate, to which he was later appointed as Director. Firoz often came up with brilliant ideas for the education department, which were implemented by the Broad Management Team. Subsequently, he resigned as Director and joined the Education Foundation. He did contract work for the national Department of Education and was later approached by Education Minister Kader Asmal to join their team as Chief Director. Firoz acquitted himself well in this position and this paved the way for him to be appointed as Deputy Director-General: Financial Planning, Monitoring and Strategy. His achievements included the establishment of the IQMS Moderation Team, the OSD System which allowed teachers to receive an increment every year for the rest of their lives and the establishment of the NEEDU Unit, which was tasked with auditing the education system on a national

level. Subsequently, Firoz was transferred from the Department of Education to the Department of Higher Education. Here he was tasked with addressing problems in the TVET sector (formerly known as FET colleges).

Firoz Patel was a hard-working and dedicated public servant, who devoted his skills, experience, time and energy to the profession he so much loved. This was the case across the spectrum of his career as a teacher, school manager and senior education technocrat.

We often spoke about the vision for a better South Africa; that we should be led by credible politicians with proven track records of achievement in the areas that are of greatest concern to the nation: crime, poverty, unemployment and chronic diseases. At Firoz's memorial I said, "We will celebrate the future that your courage, commitment and sacrifice made possible."