

**Tribute to Benjamin Richard: Leader of the Progressive Teacher  
Movement in Lenasia  
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**(Ismail Vadi)**

Benjamin Richard is no more. In that Lenasia has lost one of the best in a generation of teachers, who dedicated their lives in the service of their community and its learners. His professionalism in the classroom was unmatched and his commitment to building the progressive teacher union movement in Lenasia and the country will never be forgotten.



The best tribute a teacher can get is from his students. Over time they can read you as a charm. I want to share with you some of the messages I received from his former students, who today are leaders in our community and country.

Ferial Adam, who served as the Chairperson of the Board of Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse and is the current Director of WaterCan, said Mr Richard displayed a quiet strength. “He was not loud and pushy; he garnered our respect through his patient and near silent work with us. Together with Rafiq Jazbhay and Yasmin Sarvan, they took us on environmental camps, which served as an activist school. He was patient with everyone, a great listener and great influencer. We all felt special in his presence. What amazing an human being.”

Myan “Duggy” Naidoo, the principal of Progress Primary School, said that Mr Richard was “such a gentle and empathetic person, who took his work as a guidance teacher very seriously. He would visit the homes of students experiencing learning difficulties and showing signs of personal and emotional stress. He lent an ear to every student; every one of us could relate to him and he commanded our respect without ever lifting the cane.”

Naazim Adam, the principal of Impala Crescent Primary School and an influential activist in the Palestinian solidarity movement in the country, said that Mr Richard “enriched our lives; he gave us opportunities to develop our talents in a way that very few other teachers did, and he went out of his way to help students. He was instrumental in helping us to form SRCs and supported my parents in establishing the PTSA at Topaz High School. Mr Richard was a beautiful soul.”

Neeshan Balton, who taught with Benji and is the Executive Director of the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, sent a message from Bosnia, saying Ben was the “epitome of gentleness. He never displayed anger, and his warm, welcoming smile drew a person to him. He always led the school assembly with a guitar and song that awakened our consciousness. Ben was deeply passionate about anti-racism work in education and not so long ago he donated a large collection of his books on the worldwide struggle against racism to the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation.”

Shan said it is up to me to reveal if I wanted to a simple fact. Around March 1988, Ben had given to him the keys to their house as his family was going on holiday. That venue was used to store an arms cache of the MK unit that was operating in Lenz at the time. Benji suspected that his place was being used for some political purposes, but he never once questioned Shan about his activities; that was the level of political trust and respect between them.

Ismail Momoniat, from National Treasury said that Ben was “dedicated and popular teacher”; Azhar Saloojee, former principal of Nirvana High School sent a simple message, “What a fine gentleman”, and Shafi Ameermia, former SA Human Rights Commissioner said, “an extraordinary human being and an exceptional teacher.’

So, who was Benjamin Richard? He born on 8 July 1948 and grew up in a sugar cane village in Cornubia in KwaZulu-Natal. He was the grandson of indentured labourers. In 1961, when there was a referendum to determine whether South Africa should become a Republic, Ben did not receive at school a cold drink, some fruit and a packet of chips because his father voted “No” in the referendum ballot to determine South Africa’s status as

a Republic. He attended the Transvaal College of Education from 1968 to 1970, and his first teaching appointment was in 1971 at Lenasia High School, where he developed a lifelong friendship with the veteran educationist, Mr Billy Morgan. He resigned at the end of 1972 to study at the University of Durban-Westville, where he got his first taste of student politics.

In 1976, he was appointed at Nirvana High and later taught at Topaz Secondary School. It was at Topaz that he met the young teacher and political activist, Neeshan Balton, who had a great influence on his political thinking. From then on, Ben blended his professional teaching skills with his political activism to raise the awareness of students about apartheid and struggle for freedom and justice.

When we established the Progressive Teachers' League in 1986, Ben was elected as Secretary. He was actively involved in "Teacher Unity Talks" with the teacher formations like the Progressive Teachers' Union, NEUSA, WECTU and older teacher associations in the country. Billy Morgan and Ben Richard represented the PTL at the first "Teacher Unity Talks" held in Harare (Zimbabwe) of all the teacher formations representing Black teachers in South Africa. These talks were chaired by Sydney Mufamadi of COSATU and Thabo Mbeki, then a member of the ANC-in-exile.

Ben Richard was part of the group which included Yusuf Gabru, Ronald Swartz, Randall van der Heever, Duncan Hindle, Thulas Nxesi and the Secretary of TASA, who put together the twenty-one principles that formed the basis for the formation of SADTU. In 1989, Mr Morgan and Ben had the special privilege of representing the PTL at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations of the ANC's Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Morogoro, Tanzania.

Ben was a very close friend of my family. As a young teacher activist at MH Joosub Technical High School in the 1980s, Benjamin Richard, Billy Morgan, Edcent Williams, Abdul Samad "Sampie" Essack, "Billy" Motala, Mr Rathinasamy and Mr Ranchod among a few others, gave us the strength and courage to intensify the struggle against apartheid education. They held our hands and led us. They gave credibility, authenticity and legitimacy to our struggle. Often, we hid behind their huge presence and stature. But standing on their immense shoulders, we looked strong and tall.

We will miss them, and we cherish the time with those of that generation who are still with us today. Go well, Ben.