

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to thank CESA and the Young Professionals Forum, which I am a member of, for giving me this opportunity to address you all.

A special thank you my current mentors and colleagues at Worley Parsons, my Head of Department, Mr. Ian Robinson and the Manager of Engineering, Mr. Mushir Khan, for supporting and grooming young engineers for the future.

I AM HERE TO TELL YOU ABOUT MY MENTOR AND LATE DIRECTOR, MR. KHELANE NDWANDWE

I joined Asakheni Consulting Engineers in September 2005. When I joined the company I did not know how much the move would eventually change my life. I attended a very brief and informal interview on a cold Saturday morning in July 2005, nothing about my life and especially my career was ever normal again, the Saturday interview was a sure sign. Khelane did not attend the interview; the interviewers were Mrs. Celia Mullane and Mr. Balibeng Dube, directors of the company along with Khelane Ndwandwe

Celia gave me my first bit of wisdom, she said they can take me to the river but I would had to take the initiative and drink, a clever reference to learning as much as I said I wanted to. That's all I remember about the interview. Coming from Transnet where I had been executing track maintenance projects, this is all I needed to hear. When I eventually received the offer of employment which happened to be 50% reduction of my Transnet salary, I immediately signed up. I put all my plans on hold, including buying my parents a bakkie for their shop.

I met Khelane on my first day at work; he had seen my CV and technikon results. I think he knew more about me than I knew about him. He had prepared himself for my arrival and as if to curb my enthusiasm, he insisted that I start my career on the drawing board. I spent a month on the drawing board learning the basics of drawing and detailing.

CESA YOUNG ENGINEER OF THE YEAR 2005

When I joined Asakheni, Khelane had just been awarded the title of Young Engineer of the Year 2005 by CESA. This award meant a lot to and he spoke fondly of it. The award also meant much to me for I reasoned that if I was going to be a respected structural engineer, who better to learn from than a guy that has just been recognized as one of the top young engineers in the country.

Now I cannot comment on how it feels to be recognized as one of the best in the country, but I know what it feels like to work with someone that has received that recognition. In my observation and from what I gathered from colleagues at Asakheni, the award allowed Khelane to come out even more from his shell and be bolder in his training ambitions. He realized the massive influence he had over young and impressionable young engineers like me and he sought to positively utilize that. I can imagine that he realized that he now carried a responsibility far greater than just to his career but also those that looked up to him. It is a responsibility I feel he passionately carried.

Realizing that the training he received at BKS was one of the reasons he had got to where he was, Khelane set out to reproduce that same environment for his employees. I was lucky to be training at Asakheni at this time. I

left Transnet with a goal of being a structural engineer and even though I did not realize that I was now on that path at some stage, Khelane knew what I needed to know to get me there.

BUT WHO WAS KHELANE NDWANDWE?

Former CESA Young Engineer of the Year (2005), a man driven by his work and acquiring knowledge and the development of young talent that he crossed paths with. I was lucky to be one of those, and there were many. Khelane was a technically gifted engineer and successful businessman, yet humble and modest. I knew him on a professional level, and that was enough for me to get to know the person.

I got to know Khelane as a family man; a man who he cared and took care of his family. The stories he shared with the office about his family gave me the impression of a man connected to his background. I knew all the members of his family even before meeting any of them. A caring man, he even treated us like his family.

And to me, he remained a respected engineer. Someone that I looked up to and hoped to someday emulate.

Khelane had a way of explaining complex structural engineering problems in a way that left you feeling that you had arrived at the solution on your own. It left the student empowered enough and able to tackle any future problems on their own. Arriving at a solution was not about him doing it for you but rather him helping you along on your path to discovery.

Training at Asakheni was a religion and Khelane was the high priest. We had training sessions every week and these were sessions that Khelane never missed. He would drive back from site to attend the training. We took turns to prepare and present training on a structural engineering topic. I presented at a few of these sessions.

What struck me most was that each time we had the session; Khelane had the most grueling questions. And without failing he would end up sharing a lot more on the subject, going as far as giving practical examples from projects that he had worked on. I enjoyed that, it made structures come alive for me.

The love for educating and training was not a new thing for Khelane. From the many chats that we had in the office, I learned that he had started teaching whilst he was in high school. In his matric year he had found himself tutoring his fellow matric students in mathematics. He took on his mammoth task when it became evident to him that they were on a certain path to doom in mathematics. He carried on tutoring matric mathematics in his village of Mpuluzi in Mayflower in Mpumalanga during his technikon holidays and even after he had started working.

After completing his matric, Khelane was awarded a bursary to study for a National Diploma in Civil Engineering at Wits Technikon. That was his big break and a catalyst for the illustrious career that he would go on to carve out. After the National Diploma, Khelane completed his BTech degree. He would later complete a BSc Honours and an MSc degree in Structural Engineering, both from the University of Pretoria. That effectively set the bar very high for me and anyone that trained under him.

A man with education close to his heart, he shared his vision of South Africa where quality education was not a privilege to a few but a right for all. During the time that I worked with him he wrote numerous letters and articles that were published in daily newspapers like the Sowetan. These letters were mostly about the state of mathematics education in our high schools.

He also occasionally wrote letters about his favorite football team, Orlando Pirates. This was one area where differed drastically. A true Buccaneer he was and I flew the flag of the mighty Amakhosi. I have since let that mighty flag go; my heart could not take the disappointment anymore.

Between the years of 2007 and 2010, I worked exclusively as a design engineer on the Absa Towers West project under the supervision of Khelane. The training path that he had taken me on had borne fruit for both of us. I was confident and assured enough to engage and interact with senior engineers on the consulting team and also lead the reinforcing and detailing team on the project. The days spent on the drawing board paid off.

I left Asakheni Consulting Engineers on the 14th of June 2010, and two years later Khelane passed away in a car accident.

WHERE TO NOW?

Now as we are gathered here as young professionals, my heart is heavy as I know we have lost a great leader. I wonder if I have done enough to give other young engineers the mentoring that Khelane Ndwandwe gave me. Have I carried on with the work that he started with me? It seems too big a task for an individual, but one that needs to be carried out!

Where to start? There is a lot to be done to achieve the ideals of people like Khelane.

My first step was publishing an article in the March 2014 SAICE magazine. I wrote a tribute article to celebrate and share with the world the light that Khelane gave me. That done, the feeling I have is that it is not enough.

I have recently started mentoring two civil engineering students through their technikon studies. Smiso Saule is studying Civil Engineering at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. He has completed S2 level. Simlindle Ndaba has completed his Civil Engineering S4 level at the Durban University of Technology.

Both these students are now looking for in-service training opportunities, if you know any company that is looking for students, please let me know.

Two quotes from unlikely sources an actor and a professor captures the spirit we as young engineers need to have and uphold.

“If you are lucky enough to do well, it’s your responsibility to send the elevator back down”, American actor, Kevin Spacey. I believe that as we move up with the elevator, we need to leave route markers for those behind us to follow when they finally get on the elevator to the top.

A speaker at Yale University Law School commented that law was the instrument of change in the Twentieth Century, and that if a person wants to change the world in the 21st Century, they must do an MBA. If I may add to that statement, I believe that if you want to change the world in any century, you must study and promote engineering.

Now more than ever, the growth of the country depends on the young and young at heart, we as engineers should be at the forefront of this movement. It is time for us to rise up and lead the way; self-development and ploughing back of the knowledge into tertiary students as well as high school pupils will help create a future worth looking forward to and sustain our professions.