

# Three tributes

## Khelane Ndwandwe Pr Tech Eng



I have known and worked with a number of great engineers in various disciplines over my relatively short engineering career, all of whom have shaped my career and future aspirations, but none more than the late Khelane Ndwandwe.

I first met Khelane when I joined Asakheni Consulting Engineers in September 2005; he was one of the founding directors of the company. I had been working at Spoornet, now Transnet Freight Rail, prior to that (Spoornet had paid for my undergraduate studies, and to this day I am grateful to them for that support).

When I met Khelane I had just gone through a miserable first semester in my BTech studies at the University of Johannesburg. I had failed Structural Analysis IV, and for the first time ever, I doubted whether I wanted to go the

structural engineering route. To my great surprise and relief, Khelane called me into his office and opened his cupboard, and pulled out lecture notes that he had used in Structural Analysis IV at the same institution. He instructed me to use his notes and to work harder at my studies. The following semester, Asakheni Consulting Engineers offered me a bursary, and that was the start of an inspiring work relationship.

Khelane was a genius at simplifying challenges into a few simple steps. The fact that, like me, he had also not achieved the best marks, but had still managed to reach the top of his career, made me believe in his 'work hard and work smart' motto. In 2005 Khelane was awarded the prestigious SAACE (now CESA) Young Engineer of the Year award.

He shared his knowledge passionately, and training was a buzz word in the office. Working with him was a 'frustrating pleasure'. He expected way more than I thought I could deliver, but completing tasks successfully was what fired up the ambition to do more. We would work till the sun came up, and then still book only the eight hours allocated – work was linked to a salary, but was not about the salary. It was about learning and striving for excellence. This learning environment was a strategy pursued by Khelane and his fellow directors.

Our office of about 20 people had weekly training sessions, where one staff member had to research and present a structural engineering topic. In these sessions Khelane asked the most gruelling questions, and often ended up taking over

the training session because he had so much to share with his junior staff.

Khelane knew that mistakes happen, but believed that every mistake is a learning opportunity, and should not be used to ridicule the 'culprit'. His level-headed problem-solving approach when having to deal with mistakes encouraged his staff to not only bring any problems encountered on site to him, but also to present two to three potential solutions to the problem.

And all of a sudden, it was over. At the age of 43 Khelane died in a car accident on 26 January 2013. The hand that had pulled me (and many others) up was gone; the stories, inspiration, words of wisdom, all gone.

I was left asking myself, how do I inspire others as he had inspired me? I may never inspire as much as he did, so now, a year later, I decided to tell the story of the great inspirer in the hope that it will be read far and wide, and that others will glean from his example as I had. I may never advocate for decent education as much as he did – the numerous commentaries that he had published in newspapers like the *Sowetan* spoke of a hope for an even greater South Africa and the role that education can play in fulfilling that dream. Khelane taught mathematics to high school learners in his home village in Mpumalanga; it was never just talk with him.

May God bless the world with more exceptional individuals like Khelane Ndwandwe.

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