

Rolihlahla Mandela was born into the Madiba clan in the village of [Mvezo](#), in the Eastern Cape, on 18 July 1918. His mother was Nonqaphi Nosekeni and his father was Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Gadla Mandela, principal counsellor to the Acting King of the Thembu people, Jongintaba Dalindyebo. In 1930, when he was 12 years old, his father died and the young Rolihlahla became a ward of Jongintaba at the Great Place in Mqhekezweni<sup>1</sup>.

Hearing the elders' stories of his ancestors' valour during the wars of resistance, he dreamed also of making his own contribution to the freedom struggle of his people.

He attended primary school in [Qunu](#) where his teacher, Miss Mdingane, gave him the name Nelson, in accordance with the custom of giving all schoolchildren "Christian" names.

He completed his Junior Certificate at Clarkebury Boarding Institute and went on to Healdtown, a Wesleyan secondary school of some repute, where he matriculated.

Mandela began his studies for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University College of Fort Hare but did not complete the degree there as he was expelled for joining in a student protest.

On his return to the Great Place at Mqhekezweni the King was furious and said if he didn't return to Fort Hare he would arrange wives for him and his cousin Justice. They ran away to Johannesburg instead, arriving there in 1941. There he worked as a mine security officer and after meeting Walter Sisulu, an estate agent, he was introduced to Lazer Sidelsky. He then did his articles through a firm of attorneys – Witkin, Eidelman and Sidelsky.

He completed his BA through the University of South Africa and went back to Fort Hare for his graduation in 1943.

Meanwhile, he began studying for an LLB at the University of the Witwatersrand. By his own admission he was a poor student and left the university in 1952 without graduating. He only started studying again through the University of London after his imprisonment in 1962 but also did not complete that degree.

In 1989, while in the last months of his imprisonment, he obtained an LLB through the University of South Africa. He graduated in absentia at a ceremony in Cape Town.

### **Entering politics**

Mandela, while increasingly politically involved from 1942, only joined the African National Congress in 1944 when he helped to form the ANC Youth League (ANCYL).

In 1944 he married Walter Sisulu's cousin, Evelyn Mase, a nurse. They had two sons, Madiba Thembekile "Thembi" and Makgatho, and two daughters both called Makaziwe, the first of whom died in infancy. He and his wife divorced in 1958.

Mandela rose through the ranks of the ANCYL and through its efforts, the ANC adopted a more radical mass-based policy, the Programme of Action, in 1949.

In 1952 he was chosen as the National Volunteer-in-Chief of the Defiance Campaign with Maulvi Cachalia as his deputy. This campaign of civil disobedience against six unjust laws was a joint programme between the ANC and the South African Indian Congress. He and 19 others were charged under the Suppression of Communism Act for their part in the campaign and sentenced to nine months of hard labour, suspended for two years.

A two-year diploma in law on top of his BA allowed Mandela to practise law, and in August 1952 he and Oliver Tambo established South Africa's first black-owned law firm in the 1950s, Mandela & Tambo.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of 1952 he was banned for the first time. As a restricted person he was only permitted to watch in secret as the Freedom Charter was adopted in Kliptown on 26 June 1955.