

A sad tribute to my Grootman, Ronnie Mamoepa



By [Bonnie Ramaila](#)

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A government communicator that has not had the chance of associating, talking or socialising with Ronnie Mamoepa, whom I affectionately called Grootman, has lost a great opportunity.



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I have never met a more hard-working, focussed, intelligent and a kind-hearted communicator in government like him. Most of the government communicators that had the pleasure to sit with him in meetings will tell you that he was a slave driver. I remember he once called a meeting at the Union Buildings (UB) which started at 14:00 and went on until 19:30, on a Friday. During one of our breaks, I said to him. “Waitsi mara wena Grootman o sleg, o ka bitsa meeting on a Friday nogal, o etsa ke gore ga o sa nwa bjala – haven’t you had enough of sobriety?” He laughed so hard, I could hear his laughter reverberating on the UB walls. Back at the meeting, we were all worn out and our creative juices had started to run dry, but he kept on churning ideas, constructing sentences and developing well-greased strategies and plans, whilst we were yawning and moaning. He was so focussed, he shamed all of us with his enthusiasm.

I admired his broad knowledge and great insight on the socio-economic and political issues of our country, his intelligence and saviness endeared him to the media fraternity. He had loyalty for this government and really focussed on his career as a communicator and government spokesperson. Highly opinionated and loud, you could not help but listen when he spoke to journalists on the phone – twisting a lie to suit the truth, he had most journalists eating out of the palm of his hand and he’d tell you. “That’s how it’s done.” He is one of a few government communicators that never left public service. Just like the Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:7 – “He fought the good fight, he finished the race and have kept the faith.”

Great storyteller

Grootman was a great story teller with an incredibly rich imagination. Anyone who has worked or known him, will tell you how animated and theatrical he was when he told anecdotes of his incarceration together with other comrades. He told the stories so humorously, he made incarceration look like a noble act, so much so that you’d be envious, wishing you were there.

A heavy smoker, he'd take smoking breaks and was so generous, he'd offer me a drag even though he knew I did not smoke. That's how I ended up becoming a social smoker. That was the biggest mistake I made. We became smoking partners. He was situated in the west wing, and I in the east wing and he'd call and meet with me halfway to chat about communication and plans. He shared his vision about how government communication should be structured and had so much insight with regards to this. We also exchanged business ideas and of course the occasional tittle tattle about this and that and I'll always cherish every moment I shared with him.

I know that some government communicators would contact him for assistance in verifying facts when drafting speeches for ministers for either budget vote or government related engagements. Grootman was my sounding board on most speeches I did and he'd say, "It is your responsibility as a communicator to set the agenda for your department and minister, which the media should drool over for the whole week or the whole month," obviously exaggerating a bit on the month part, I'd wince at the unsolicited advice at an inopportune time. Grootman, a seasoned communicator, didn't like asking for opinions and input from fellow colleagues. But the last time I sat with him in his office at Tuynhuys, I found him preparing speaking notes and he asked for my input. It was my last week in government and upon finishing the speech two hours later, I shared with him my reasons for leaving the public service and he said to me, "Your life seems focused when you are seated, when you stand up, it changes dramatically and I don't mean dramatic in a good way." I knew exactly what he meant. I just shook my head, rolled my eyes and chuckled as I left his office. He gave me a week's lecture about the decision that I've made because he knew that every time I got frustrated and needed help, he'd sort me out. He was a caring brother and liked giving advice and sharing ideas. He really lived up to his title, Grootman.

A real Grootman

When I got the news that he had suffered a stroke and was hospitalised, I remembered the story he told me about his hospitalisation a few years ago, when he worked at Home Affairs. He had a tooth ache. It turned out that his nerves were affected and this caused him agonising pain. I remember how he vividly told me the story of that pain. He was pacing up and down, holding his cigarette in his right hand, stopping as he paced, holding his bald head and jaw with his left hand showing me where the excruciating part of the pain was situated and saying, "tjo, tjo, tjo!" closing his eyes and shaking his head. His story was so animated. He gave pain distinct features and made it come to life. I could feel and see the pain, and at the same time I was in stitches at how he related the story. I was looking forward to meeting with him after he had recovered to yet again listen as he would humorously relate his ordeal. But sadly, he passed.

I have never been so saddened by the death of a co-worker than this esteemed colleague, friend and real Grootman, like Ronnie. I will miss his bubbly personality, kind-heartedness, humour and caring nature. I will always cherish what I have learned from him as a communicator, his professional integrity and time spent with him. Government communication will not be the same without him. I hope his vision of how government communication should be structured and become, those great ideas that never saw the light of day, will be considered and implemented in his memoriam.

May his dear soul, rest in peace.

ABOUT BONNIE RAMAILA

Bonnie Ramaila is an international communication consultant. She previously worked in the private and public sector as a communication expert. She runs a consultancy that specialises in bespoke communication for niche clients and individuals. Services include communication and media advice, facilitation, publicity and strategy development. She writes in her personal capacity.

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