

Cosatu general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi speaks personally

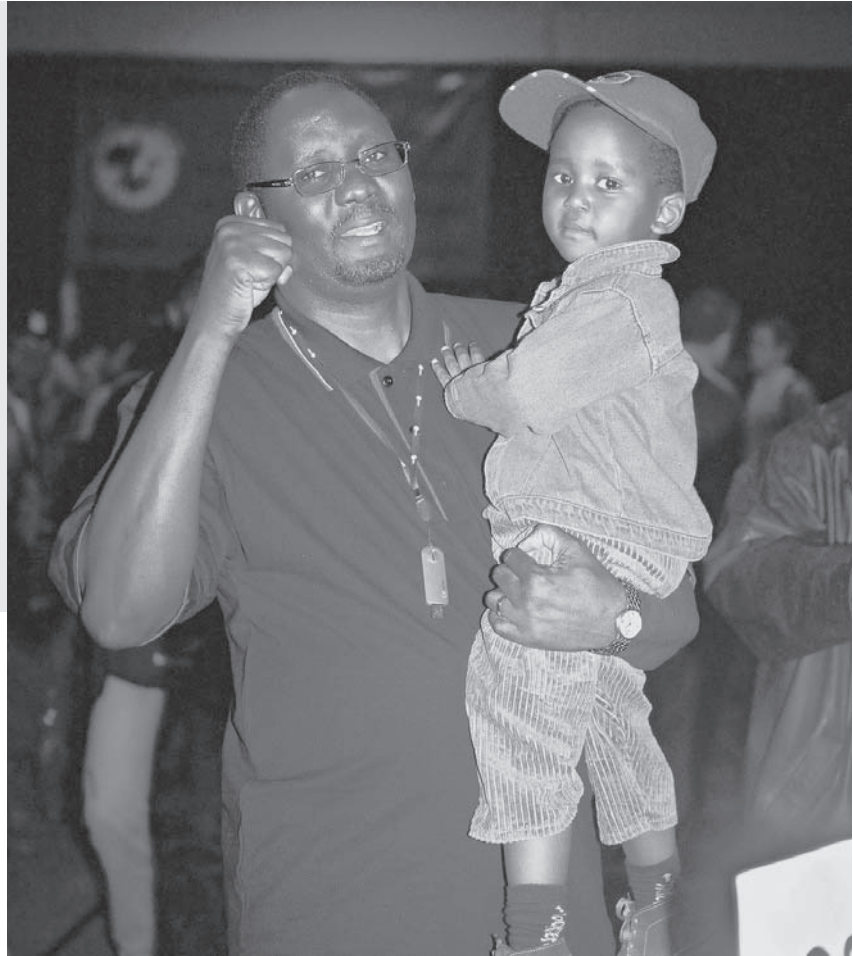
Kally Forrest talks to Cosatu general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, about his childhood, good and bad moments, likes and dislikes and his inspirations.

Where were you born?

I was born on a farm in the Karoo outside Hanover in the Northern Cape. It was a sheep and cow farm.

What are the earliest memories of your childhood?

Playing with kids in a small community. A very superstitious environment. From a young age we did farm labour. Opening taps, fetching cows and sheep, separating the lambs from their mothers to cut off the lambs' tails. And hunting, we did a lot of hunting. We hunted dassies, hares, duikers with our dogs, carrying sticks. We had big competitions about which dogs could run faster, hunt better - our dogs always came top! I can still remember their names (laughter). It gave me a lifelong love of dogs, I have five at home.



William Matlala

Who were the important adults in your life and what did you learn from them?

My father. And my mother. From them I learnt respect for people, love of my family and wanting to make them happy. My father had been a miner in a Transvaal mine and then became a farm labourer. He was well organised. They had 12 kids, I was number ten, (three died) but he saw to it that we never went without food. Even when we were evicted from a farm and sometimes

spent three weeks or more living on the side of the road. He would bike to surrounding farms to find opportunities on another farm and he would save for the future. Even if it was only mealie meal, water and sugar.

Sometimes when we were evicted, usually because the farmer didn't need the labour anymore, we would sleep under a donkey cart in the bitter cold nights of the Northern Cape. The children would sleep underneath and my parents

around to keep us warm.

That is something we have carried forward in our family – nobody suffers. My father inculcated the idea of giving gifts, of sharing. I still proudly wear things that members of my family have given me.

They were both disciplinarians. We'd be sjambokked with belts made of cow hide for things like stealing fruit from the orchards, or vegetables like carrots, even if my father thought it was unfair that the farmer kept all these things to himself. He'd beat us if we didn't carry out instructions, or if we cooked raw *mpbokoqu* (sour pap and fresh milk). There was no such thing as child abuse then! Anybody in the community could give you a hiding and then you hid it from your parents in case you got another hiding. But I adored them. Nothing contributed more to me being general secretary of Cosatu than my father. We don't drink, all the kids have homes – they laid a good foundation.

My mother passed away in 1988 but in my silences I still share difficulties with her.

What schooling did you have?

I was the only one in my family to go to school and get matric. I went to sub A in 1971 when I was ten or eleven. We moved away from the farm to a small township, Sada, where there was a school for children of farm labourers who had been evicted in the area – Steynsburg, De Aar, Hanover, Sabelo, Middelburg. My family still stay there, 33 kilometres from

Queenstown. I learnt a lot in Sada from older political prisoners who were banished there on release in the sixties following the Sharpeville massacre.

What was one of the saddest moments in your life?

My mother's death after the 1987 mineworkers strike. It was a legal strike but for the bosses in those days there was a thin line between legal and illegal. I was dismissed from Vaal Reefs, 50 000 miners were dismissed in the strike. I left the mine with R150. It was very hard for my mother. A year later in 1988 she had a stroke and died. She was struggling with the loss of income. For me it was terrible on a personal level. I became an organiser earning R300 a month and Jesse Maluleke and I lived in a shack. It was tough times.

What are you most afraid of?

I'm not afraid of anything. In the 1980s I looked forward to being detained. I never feared anything, even being shot. I would taunt a policeman with a gun. I would fight back when I was tortured. I was a good boxer when I was young, I could have turned professional. I had an absolute hate for the system, a deep anger. I still carry many marks on my body and my right ear is



not good. I was often pulled in – two weeks, three months in prison.

We walked from school to school, with no money or water, recruiting for Cosas (Congress of South African Students). I thought of going into exile to join MK but my father died so I decided to go

to the mines and support my mother. Some went of course and left their families.

What was the happiest moment in your life?

Mandela's release! We rushed out in the streets of Jo'burg still holding *The Star* with his photo. The police teargassed us.

I was in detention when Sisulu was released in 1989. I was released the day before the FNB rally. I had been on hunger strike, I was skinny but I marched the whole day around Sharpeville township, dancing and singing. I had a good voice then, not the old 'skorro' it is now (laughter).

What is your biggest dislike?

Dishonesty, lies, pretenders. People saying things they don't believe just to get elected. Chameleons who change colours when it suits them. It's cowardice, you can't rely on a coward.

What do you do to relax?

Well I'm a member of Virgin Active, but it's a contribution (laughter) as I hardly ever go there. I love music. African music, local jazz. I play music loudly to relax especially in the car. And I walk my dogs. I sometimes go ten, eleven kilometres with them, my jack russels, boerbuls and mongrel. I read.

I have read Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo's biographies and sometimes I read Marxist literature. I don't read novels.

What is your favourite music?

I like Hugh Masekela. I have a CD that he made with Jonas Gwanga *Homecoming* that I especially like.

Miriam Makeba. And I listen to Richard Nwamba's African music on Saturday afternoons on the radio. I listen to music on Kaya FM which has good African music. On Sundays I listen all day to Metro. I enjoy love songs.

In the week early in the morning I listen to Radio Ukhozi until I switch over to SAfm at 6.30. John Perlman was such a magnificent radio person. You could feel he was to the left. He did good research, he was born with a feeling in here (indicates his chest). I had a good personal relationship with him.

What are your favourite clothes?

Oh, I'm not a fundi on clothes. I like to champion Proudly South African. When I wear South African I feel comfortable and I don't feel guilty. But we are losing the battle. For example, I looked for a lumbar jacket, I promise you, for six months and in the end I had to buy a Chinese one. Terrible. I wear red union T-shirts, you can't go to a strike in a shirt and tie (laughter) and African and Cuban shirts which are often white.

One word to describe your politics

Socialist. I want to serve the marginalised and I want to struggle with them. I'm a worker, I can't imagine not being a worker. I'm not feathering my bed for where I go next. I don't know where I'll go after Cosatu.

What is one thing that could improve your life?

If I had a full compliment of staff in Cosatu and good intellectual capacity. Life is difficult without this. I also have some personal



relationship challenges to go through. If I could sort this out it would improve my life and make my working output better.

What is your favourite food?

I like traditional food. Dumplings and meat. My mother made it and I can also do it myself. The Jacob Malala restaurant in the Carlton Centre has really good traditional food.

What kind of people would you like your children to become?

To have my mother and father's qualities. Loving, caring, family centred as I have become. My boy is special, I pick him up from crèche, he spends time with me here (in Cosatu head office). My daughter who is 19 is sweet, disciplined, not spoiled, respectful - a perfect human being.

Who do you most admire?

Chris Hani, Che Guevara - they were similar human beings. They could have done many other things but they went with the people. One of my saddest moments was Chris Hani's assassination, absolutely shocking. He was an unbelievable orator. Hani could articulate working class issues more than anyone else. You could relate to him yourself as a worker.

And Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu. Tambo was consultative, down to earth. If one person disagreed he would seek them out and talk to them for hours and bring them on board. Not even Mandela had as much respect from students. We would go out on top of a hill at home and listen to OR (Tambo) speak on Radio Freedom - you are with him when you go down from the mountain. You respect him without knowing him personally. Extraordinary leader. His name should be written in diamonds. There are over a hundred songs about him that we sang, more than about anyone else.

What inspires you?

Suffering and what the unemployed go through. We get frustrated losing macroeconomic issues, the Zimbabwe issue, the insults that come in our direction, the Alliance not functioning well. But can you imagine what it would be like if there was no Cosatu? I come back to this. This gives me energy especially to represent those who cannot articulate their suffering.

I've worked in a mine, on farms. Farms have not changed since I grew up on them in the 1960s. My home town Sada is just the same. No roads, pit toilets, almost 100% unemployment. It was neglected by the homeland Ciskei government and now by the ANC. The suffering of workers is real, poverty is real, it's not about reading from books. It's still affecting millions of people. I am here to make a contribution. We need to build a stronger Cosatu, a stronger democracy movement. This is not a superficial thing.

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