

Cosatu president, Willie Madisha, reveals all



AFTER WORK

South African Labour Bulletin finds out more about Cosatu president, Willie Madisha, and probes into his deepest secrets.

Where were you born?

Oh, in a village in Limpopo, Dikgading in Botlokwa. It was a very rural area. There was no clinic and one nurse serviced the whole village and would come to deliver a baby at your house. Then later we went to live in Pretoria and I grew up in Atteridgeville where I went to school and teachers training college.

What is your earliest memory of your childhood?

I think a strong sense of sharing. There was a sea of poverty (which was to have a great influence on my later life) but I never slept hungry. You could go into anyone's hut and share food with them. On the farms the women ground maize with a grinding stone on rock to make good maize meal. We would get goat's milk and eat pap and milk.

There was always meat. I remember in the early 1960s going with my mother's uncle and the dog when I was about five years' old to hunt for a hare to eat. A ranger came round the corner and I was so frightened I turned and ran away as fast as I could and my uncle got arrested. He was angry when he came back and blamed me for running away. [laughter]

Where do you live now?

I have a house in Limpopo, 15kms

from Zebedelia in a place called Lebowakgomo. I could find no employment in Pretoria after college so I got a teaching job here in 1983. I still get a salary from there, I don't get a salary from Cosatu. I taught there for ten years before getting involved in Cosatu. My wife lives there with my kids. I love it there.

When I'm in town I live in Winchester Hills south of Johannesburg in a house Sadtu (SA Democratic Teachers Union) provides for me to live in.

What are you reading at the moment?

I'm reading Edward W Said's *Representation of the Intellectual*. He is the author too of *Culture and Imperialism*. I'm reading this because I am interested in this talk of the Native Club and the development of black intellectuals. I read widely. Every night. I read both fiction and non-fiction and am interested in anything around the issue of capitalism and socialism.

Who is your favourite musician?

Joe Lovalo. He is a jazz musician from the US. My favourite is jazz. It is nice in the township on a Saturday afternoon to have a beer, relax and listen to the jazz music that people are playing in the houses, in the street. I can really unwind.

What is your favourite TV programme?

The news. I don't like the stuff from overseas much like *The Bold and the Beautiful*. I really enjoy local shows in African languages. I think my favourite is *Umzini we Zensizwe*, all about hostel life.

What are your favourite clothes?

Oh I'm always in union T-shirts like I have on. Nothing specific is my favourite. I'll wear anything. Sometimes I don't like being in a union T-shirt because workers everywhere come up to me and start to complain. I went to the chemist recently in a red T-shirt and these workers came up to me and started to complain about the Saccawu organiser not coming to visit them for a month. And how when he comes he goes to talk to management first. Of course I listen to the complaints and I followed it up with Saccawu later and told them that workers in so and so workplace are not happy.

What do you do to relax?

I have small chance to do this. But I like to take the kids to the park. I go home about every three weeks as I'm always away. I like to play with my kids so they don't forget me and start calling me 'uncle'. I have a daughter of 21 from my first marriage and a boy of nine and girl of seven years from my second

marriage. I also like to sit with comrades and talk and have a drink.

What is your biggest dislike?

Dishonesty. I detest that. I hate the back stabbing. Like when unions are going to their Congresses, the bad mouthing and plotting against comrades and friends, destroying people. This happens in other organisations too, it's not only the unions, like the SACP where I'm on the central committee. It's happening in the broad movement.

What was one of your most frightening moments?

In Atteridgeville as a teenager when we used to be beaten and arrested. I was in high school in 1976 when Soweto erupted. In Pretoria the uprisings happened a year later in 1977 and we did not write exams.

I remember the cops coming down the street doing raids. They would just pick up any young men around. A friend who I grew up with, we studied and taught together, he ran into our house. So my mother left the house to make it look like there was no one there. We hid under the table. Then a cop came and this eye looked through the latch. We were shaking, we could see this eye. I remember that eye looking through the latch to this day. [laughter]

Another day we could see the cops coming in our direction over the hill that overlooks Atteridgeville from the Laudium side. My mother told me to take off my trousers, she gave me a dress and put a doek on my head and told me to scrub the floor. I got busy and a cop came in. But when I turned my head he saw my hair peeping out. He grabbed me and I got beaten up and taken to the police station in my dress. [laughter]

What is one thing that could improve your life?

More time to see my family and do all the things I have to do.

What soccer team do you support and why?

Mamelodi Sundowns, the Pretoria team. My father ran a football team that would gather in our house. So we supported the Bantule Callies which then became the Bantu Callies. When they disbanded the teams in the area were Mamelodi Sundowns, the coloured team, and Mamelodi United, the African team. Later Sundowns turned professional and entered the PSA (Professional Soccer Association) so it was natural that I should support them.

What are you most afraid of?

Failure in whatever tasks I do.

What was one of your happiest moments in life?

Watching my son being born. He was being delivered and I saw this little fellow coming out. It was a caesarean and I had contrasting feelings. I felt so bad for my wife but also so happy to see the baby. It really made me respect women to see this. From that day I get really angry when I see women abused. I understood what my own mother went through to give birth to me.

Who cuts your hair?

An old man in my home township who works next to the road. I go there about every three months.

What is your favourite food?

Mogodu. [laughs] I'm a rural man. Mogodu is the stomach of an animal – sheep, cow, goat. I like these intestines with pap. I also like the heart, neck and feet of a chicken. But I like all food wherever I have travelled.

One word to describe your politics

Socialism. You shouldn't have the majority suffering while the minority have nothing. It is politics that favours the poor. The ANC is close to the poor but we need an ANC that leads the government instead of a government that leads the ANC.

What time of day is your best?

At night I have my best energy. I sit and read and write until 2-3am. It has always been like that. In 1983 I started teaching and by 1985 I was the principal of the school and I would do a lot of work at night because I was so busy in the day.

What was one of the saddest moments in your life?

My saddest moment was May Day 2003 when the bus carrying Cosatu members sunk into a dam in the Free State. I was travelling close behind the bus, about 15kms difference, as I was going to be the main speaker at the May Day Rally. I was the first one to be called and one of the first to be on the scene besides the farmer who really helped a lot. I saw the bus even before it was taken out by the farmer. It was horrible. I had to go to the stadium and instead of talking about the future of workers I had to tell everyone about the accident. Then I had to go to the hospital and meet the families and tell them who was injured, who had died. It was such an emotional kind of scene.

What inspires you?

My life has become the trade union movement. I want to achieve the objectives that we have set out and try and do as much as I can to achieve this. It is this quest that inspires me. We have to deal with unemployment and poverty. Each success is a further inspiration even though the tasks are momentous.