

Martin Wittenberg Eulogy

By Getrud Tonsing

Martin Wittenberg was born in Bethel, Germany, on 11 October 1962, to the parents Gunther Wittenberg and Monika, née Teichler. Monika always called his birth the happiest day of her life, and was a devoted mother. His father was in theological training in Germany. After his ordination, the young family moved back to South Africa on the ship to the first pastoral posting, Bellville Western Cape.

In Bellville two sisters were born, Inge and Gertrud. Martin went to Kindergarten and then started school in the German School Cape Town. He was a little thinker and philosopher from a young age, asking his parents many questions and giving his own opinions of God, the world and even political events. After a few years the family relocated to Herrenberg, Germany. Just before departure Inge and Martin got chicken pox, and the ship would not let them board. They had to stay behind with a close friend and then fly alone.

In Herrenberg sibling no 4 arrived, Reinhild. Martin proved a very devoted brother, who often played with the sisters, even though they were often infuriated by his superior wisdom and skills at games. Martin saved all his pocket money to buy paperbacks and was an avid reader. His political discussions with his father became more intense in a climate in Germany where there were many social upheavals. He also inherited his mother's passion for crafts and developed some talents there, building a large landscape for his model train and gifting his sisters many handmade items for their dolls.

Then the family moved to Pietermaritzburg. Martin quickly adapted to an English school and soon became top student in Pelham primary school. When high school time came around the decision was made to go to Alex, rather than the rival Maritzburg College. In his high school years the accolades came thick and fast, with a trophy

for being Natal Chess Champion, a Medal for the Maths Olympiad, and the invitation to the Science fortnight in London. The crowning achievement was being top Matriculant in Natal. His political interest increased all the time and his understanding of the importance of standing up for justice. He decided to do his Matric history project about the resistance against Hitler, something that deeply influenced his understanding of what the cost of standing up for justice.



In 1981 Martin started University, initially staying at home, later in digs. He became active in student politics and many fellow activists and digs mates became lifelong friends. His involvement carried the first cost relatively soon when he came home beaten up by some right wing student thugs. His parents were obviously very worried about him but unlike other activists' parents did not try to dissuade him from his involvement.

He became a heavyweight in Campus politics, being elected onto the SRC and becoming its vice-President. He was often called on to train young activists, easily explaining complex politics. Then he branched out to city and province-wide activism and then was very involved in the process of establishing the United Democratic Front which launched in 1983. His academic progress was stalling as he was more and more a full-time activist. But Martin was also not keen to finish his studies as he was able to defer the military call-up for all white young men as long as he was a registered student.

The first raids and searches by the security police began happening, particularly around the first partial state of emergency. Relationships were tense because of many reports and evidence of police spies infiltrating student organizations. But Martin was always certain of which friends he could trust absolutely and was never disappointed. Detentions were mounting and then came the crackdown on 12 June 1986,

when hundreds of activists were arrested in one massive raid. Martin had had a warning and was not home. In the next months he would move from place to place. Prominent professors from the university gave him shelter, even the vice-principal Prof Schreiner. When the family next saw Martin, he had done what many other activists also did – cut off his long hair and shaved his shaggy beard, leaving only a moustache, looking perfectly like a right wing student.

During the harsh time of repression Martin kept his involvement going, meeting with people and trying in his own way to prevent the increasing tensions in Kwazulu Natal from going up in flames. When Martin got arrested, many months later, it was embarrassingly right in the middle of peace talks to end the Natal violence. This received such negative publicity that he was not in for long and was released after just a few days. He showed us what he had been busy with in prison: He had made tiny patience cards and a chess set from till slips and toilet paper, which my mother pasted in the scrap book. The second arrest was then one which was to last five months. This was a difficult time, with few short visits, punishing interrogations, fortunately no physical torture but many mind games and little to do, until he finally got a study permit and was able to continue with his masters – having the time to come to grips with complex theories, as he later remarked. Intense international pressure resulted in his release after five months, but with heavy restrictions. These were only lifted when De Klerk unbanned all political parties and released Mandela at the beginning of 1990. He finished his Masters and graduated cum laude.

As the country transitioned, Martin transitioned to a more academic life. Then came romance with his acquaintance and then love for journalist Christina Scott and Nozipho, the child she was fostering hoping to adopt. Martin took to the role as Dad very easily. Martin and Christina married at the end of 1994, a rainbow family in a new South Africa. Martin finished his doctorate in Geography, a topic that dipped a lot into economical realities. It is a tribute to his depth and breadth of insight that he then was offered a post in Wits in economics, not having the undergraduate background. They trusted that he would catch up, and indeed he managed to do so, all the way to a second masters. All this, while being a very hands on Dad and chief cook in the home, whom Nozipho once called “Boss of the Pots”. The family grew. Ali was born on Freedom Day in 1998. Martin loved his role as father and did many creative things with his children. Then in 2001 the family moved to the United States for

a year where Martin had his sabbatical. He was gaining a reputation of being a researcher of note, with people co-operating in research projects from all over the world. Ben was born not long after their return in April 2002.

The decision to accept a job offer from UCT was difficult for Christina and resulted in her being without a job for a prolonged time which put a strain on her and the marriage. But the family settled into life in Cape Town where Martin became a highly respected member of the academic community. The children settled into the schools, doing well, and Martin kept up the role as hands on Dad, with many outings in the beautiful Western Cape. When the marriage began to break up Martin moved out to Hout Bay staying with his close friends who became like another set of parents for the children whenever they came to visit. His friends rallied around him as the break-up became more and more traumatic. Then came the most traumatic event for everyone, when Christina died on 31 October 2011 in an accident, caused by an intern she was teaching to drive. Again friends rallied around the family from all sides, also the Canadian family who continued to be very supportive, also of Martin.

Martin continued as a productive researcher, well-loved teacher and helpful supervisor - though a bit intimidating for anyone who wanted to cut corners in their research. He was immensely proud of the achievements of his post-graduate students. A major achievement was building up DataFirst to become a highly respected unit for data research and dissemination based at UCT. His research project near the Kruger Park allowed him and his family many special wildlife trips. He was a devoted single Dad and continued the tradition of hikes, outings in nature and games nights, honing his children's mental skills. His passion for photography grew and he began to make the most beautiful photo books filled with the most special memories, always shared with the family.

In 2012 Martin was promoted to full professor. His father was still there for his inaugural lecture, shortly before he was diagnosed with cancer. Unfortunately cancer runs in the family and in 2018 came Martin's diagnosis. Thus began his last long struggle. Again friends rallied around him and his family, a solid support all the way. Martin was a fighter and he had the best care. Martin recovered enough to continue to teach, supervise, even go on one more trip to Kruger. He planned to keep going as long as he could, but was getting weaker. He continued his regular visits to

Kirstenbosch, still taking many photographs of birds, plants and other wildlife, making beautiful calendars of bird photographs. He phoned his mother every day, and she took great strain being a witness to his suffering. He was a fighter to the end, putting himself through punishing schedules of therapy, watching his diet and exercising. His mother died end of May. His condition had put great strain on her heart. He found it very hard not to be able to go to her funeral and really missed his daily conversations.

On Friday 19 July he began to deteriorate dramatically and on Sunday morning was taken in to hospital. He kept fighting for a few more days, but died peacefully on 27 July shortly after 7 pm.

His family, his many wonderful friends, colleagues and students remember him for his love and concern, his deep commitment to justice and truth and academic integrity, his loyalty to the people dear to him and his love for beauty and nature, and his dry sense of humour.

