

John Morrison (1946 – 2014)

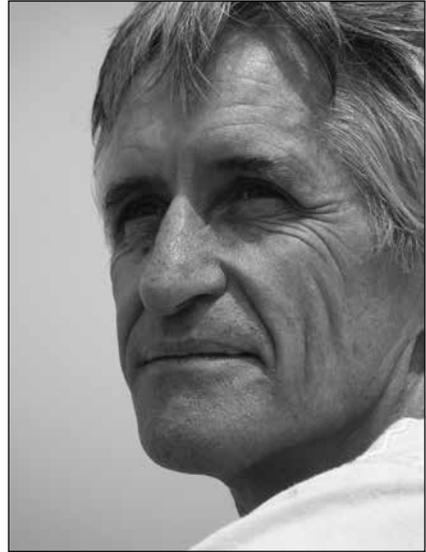
JOHN Morrison, former manager at the Bessie Head Municipal Library in Pietermaritzburg has died. He was 67.

Morrison was born in Germiston in 1946 and after attending a local primary school went to Queen’s High, a co-ed school in Kensington. In 1969 he came to Pietermaritzburg to do a BCom at the then University of Natal, then changed to a BA, which he completed in 1975.

That span of time was explained by Morrison’s other activities during this period. He was a member of the Nusas Wages Commission created in the 1970s together with David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Charles Nupen and the assassinated Rick Turner. Morrison also helped edit, with John Aitchison, the newspaper produced by the Wages Commission, *Isisebenzi* (The Worker). Morrison was also involved with the formation of the first black trade unions that grew out of the Nusas-created Benefit Society.

Morrison was also chairperson of the Young Progressives (the youth arm of the Progressive Federal Party) in Pietermaritzburg as well as being a member of the Pietermaritzburg branch of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR).

Morrison also spent 18 months working as a research assistant to Natal Museum archaeologist Tim Maggs. In a 2011 interview with *The Witness*, Morrison recalled that it “was such a great privilege sitting around a campfire with people like David Webster, who was later assassinated, Shula Marks, Jeff Guy, John Wright, Martin Hall and Colin Webb. These were people with brilliant minds. It opened up a new world for me in way that I don’t think



John Morrison

students get to experience in quite the same way today.”

How did Morrison become a librarian? “I was desperate to get a job,” he said. “I’d made myself virtually unemployable. And I knew some librarians – they seemed nice people and it seemed a nice thing to do.”

Morrison studied library science on the local campus, obtaining his degree in 1978 and then working for the provincial library service. He returned to Johannesburg in 1981 and, after assisting his father in a building project, worked for the South African Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR). “It was a great time to be there,” he said. “In 1983 the United Democratic Front had been formed and there was a surge of political energy that eventually changed South Africa.”

He also provided a home in transit for political exiles and their families.

When Morrison heard there was a job being advertised at the Natal Soci-

ety Library in the reference section he applied and was appointed to the post. Morrison took over as deputy director of the library in 1996 and became director in 1999. He oversaw its transition from the Natal Society Library, the only privately run public library in the country, to the Bessie Head municipal library it is today. He retired in 2011.

Morrison was a well-known runner and completed 28 Comrades Marathons. Following his first run in 1968, Morrison began seconding so-called

“ghost runners”, black runners who ran the race, but were not officially recognised, and was among those white runners who would hand their medals to black runners who had “unofficially” qualified.

Morrison leaves a wife, psychologist Floss Mitchell, and children Emma, Alice and Guy.

STEPHEN COAN

(With acknowledgements to The Witness)

Geoffrey Soni (1925 – 2014)

GEOFFREY Dixon Soni was born at Springvale on 28 January 1925. His parents were Elliott Soni and Annie Nzimande, who had been married at Springvale on 24 July 1917. Annie and Elliott brought Geoffrey for baptism at St Andrew’s Church on 15 February, eighteen days after he was born.

Springvale was one of the earliest Anglican missions to be established in the Colony of Natal. Henry Callaway started it in 1858, and it was developed in the usual way, typical at the time. Being a medical practitioner, Callaway opened a clinic, but a school was the first priority, and the extensive property was available for tenant farmers.

Springvale had been functioning for almost 70 years when Geoffrey Soni was born. Education was readily available for him, and his early years were immersed in an Anglican ethos which he would maintain for the rest of his life. He was baptised by the Reverend Walter Mzamo, the Priest-in-Charge of Springvale. In 1924 Mzamo had been

appointed the first African Priest-in-Charge at Springvale, having been at the Umzimkulwana Mission for 12 years. Mzamo served the Springvale Mission until his death in 1932.

Mzamo was an accomplished musician, having four of his compositions in the current Zulu hymnal, *Amaculo Esheshi*. Although Geoffrey Soni was still a child when Mzamo died, the musical tradition left behind must have influenced the young boy. His great interests were in education and in church music, but he also gave much attention to church history and to young people.

Geoffrey Soni was primarily an educationist, and he was trained as a teacher in Umlazi, where he became a school principal. He was transferred in 1956 to Ladysmith, where he was School Inspector.

Making good use of his background in education, Dr Soni gave dedicated and sustained service, during his latter years, on the boards of three educational institutions in Pietermaritzburg.