

Pappou funeral speech 17/09/2020

Introduction

Good morning - President Rampahosa, your Eminence Archbishop Damaskinos, dignitaries, family, fellow mourners and to all those watching in South Africa and beyond. My name is Nicholas Bizos, and I am George's grandson.

I would first like to thank all those that have sent messages of condolence and sympathy from across the world over the past week. It's been quite stunning to see the outpouring of adoration, admiration and gratitude for the life that pappou lived. My cousin Lucia based in the UK summed it up when she said "I knew pappou was well known, but the last few days have really brought home how much he meant to people. It's also nice that, through the interviews and interactions with family, people are getting to see that he was more than just a big lawyer".

I stand before you all, paying homage to my pappou, with multiple conflicting emotions. The problem with having someone as revered as pappou, is that you come to believe he is immortal. There's now deep sadness that he has finally passed on, yet some relief that the suffering of his last few months has ended. A heavy heart that his home now sits empty, that he's not in his bedroom or in his vegetable garden, yet a warmth in knowing that he is reunited with our beloved grandmother and his wife, Rita. Agony that there are no longer long, memorable, important stories to hear him tell, but immense pride that his stories are those that will be told forever.

Every turn that pappou made, every weave of the tapestry that is his life, was done with the honest and devout intention of making things better, of doing something right, something to correct an injustice or help relieve someone's suffering. There was never selfishness, avarice or fame, as the goal. Guided by his principles of fairness, equality and justice, pappou aimed at changing lives through his knowledge and use of the law.

Materialism was never a part of his life - his beginnings were humble, his middle was humble, he was humble at the end. The impact that he had was always through his actions and his words, never through what he owned or accumulated.

Injustice irked him, it was what drove him to be who he was. He never wanted anyone to practice hegemony over another based on some immutable characteristic. He saw the humanity in all, and gave his lifetime to promoting and protecting this humanity.

A number of reflections of Pappou's life since his passing last week have used the Cavafy poem highlighting the journey to Ithaca, and how the path to your destination is what defines you. Given how his actions were his greatest achievements, I'd like to use a different quote from Cavafy, which reads:

"From all I did and all I said, let no one try to find out who I was"

His actions defined him, and given the consistency in the memorials seen and heard in recent days, these actions were always the same: aimed at improving the lives of all South Africans, and holding himself and those around him to the highest possible expectations of ethics and integrity.

Like his good friend Nelson Mandela to whom he was deeply loyal, his life was always bigger than what we as his family could comprehend. He gave completely of himself to his wife, children and grandchildren, but also to the thousands of families that have attended SAHETI, the school he helped found over 40 years ago. He also gave himself to the children and family of those he defended or sought justice on behalf of. And he gave himself to South Africa through his work on the constitution and guarding the human rights of those that call South Africa home. It's that complexity and colour to his life that I've always known about, and have come to appreciate as I've become older, hopefully wiser, and far more aware of his impact on the history of this beautiful country. I know he hoped that those that follow him will continue to give of themselves in making this country what he and his contemporaries envisioned, and I trust that the leaders of South Africa will continue aspiring to making these visions of a just and fair South Africa a reality.

The enduring memory I'll have of Pappou is how his humility was always present - he never saw himself as bigger than just a man. He wore his fame well - his time was always best spent by being present, whether it was with family, a person who had approached him on the street for a word or a handshake, or with presidents and prime ministers.

A story that I'll never forget is how, when we were together in Greece many years ago, pappou had been invited to give a talk somewhere. And this somewhere was far enough away from our house that an offer had been made for a car to be sent to fetch pappou. And pappou refused. I couldn't quite understand why - to me, then, a chauffeur showed importance, prestige. When I asked him why he didn't want the car, he said "when they look back at the books one day in the future, and see that money was spent to fetch someone called George Bizos, I don't want history to think that I thought myself so important that I needed a car to fetch me". Well pappou, unfortunately, history will look on you as far more than that. History will judge you as a good man, a man who made the world better for his existence, and a man who will be remembered in South Africa, Greece and beyond for many years to come.

[A man of courage who always sided with the truth, spent lifetime fighting injustice and prejudice]

Fiercely honest, deeply loyal