

TELEVISION, POLITICS AND SCOOPS

Well-known SABC TV news reporter and commentator, Cliff Saunders, passed away on May 6 at age 79. He died of heart failure in his townhouse in a Northcliff complex in Johannesburg. His health had been deteriorating for the previous three years.

Cliff matriculated at the School in the mid 1950s.

He worked for the SABC for 33 years until he retired in 1994 and was considered controversial by many because of his pre-eminent television coverage in the late 1970s and 1980s, especially during the pre-Namibian independence era and the Angolan War.

One guff-writer labelled him as SA's answer to Josef Goebbels, an extremely scathing and indeed despicable charge. Cliff was also accused of having been an apartheid-era National Intelligence Service operative which he vehemently denied. Incidentally, there are few leading hard news political reporters who don't interact intermittently with intelligence services in keeping ahead of the news game.

True, Cliff held centre-stage on screen over extended periods, but due primarily to his professionalism, energy, understanding of issues and ability to put these in perspective for viewers. He was particularly quick in getting to work in breaking news, was a good live reporter, and communicated with command, comfort and clarity.

Besides, he enjoyed sound working relationships with the likes of former Presidents PW Botha, FW de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and former Foreign Affairs Minister Pik Botha.

A valid criticism perhaps was that he dished up too much on Pik Botha during the height of the latter's career. But there were good reasons for that. Botha had a grip on international affairs enjoyed by few of his colleagues and counterparts, had spent time at the International Court in The Hague, had been SA's representative at the UN, and was generally well-briefed as Foreign Minister.

Mandela, interestingly, exhibited a particularly soft spot for Cliff, and, in his later years generally gave him first opportunity at media conferences to ask questions. This relationship was sparked when Cliff was based in London and travelled to Oslo to cover the Nobel Peace Prize joint presentation to Mandela and De Klerk.

Confident and up for the challenge from time to time, Cliff won several awards for various programmes that he produced. Some years ago the School instituted an award for cultural achievement named after him, using one of his Artes Awards as the floating trophy. It's presented at Valedictory each year.

Cliff graduated with a BA at Wits majoring in 'Afrikaans en Nederlands', taught for a few years, and did a diploma in broadcasting before joining the SABC.

He was married to his wife Ria for 57 years, and they lived in Fairlands, Johannesburg, for 23 of those years. Although they met at primary school, their relationship only bloomed during their

university years. They had five children, namely Cliff, Yolande, Albert, Ilette and Dudley, and six grandchildren.

Dudley, a world-class TV cameraman aged 45, was killed in Soweto in 2013 when hit by a train while filming for Arrow Media. One commentator at the time said that this might have been because of 'a determination to overcome his pedigree'.

According to Cliff, after filming an interview with a train surfer – each on either side of the track – Dudley stayed behind to get one final shot, an extreme close-up of a passing train. "The train was coming from around a corner. We think he misjudged its speed, firstly, and when you are looking through a camera lens your depth perception is thrown off.

"These factors, combined with Dudley's renowned fearlessness, saw him inch too close to the track. The train struck him from the front. The assistant cameraman rushed over to help, and found Dudley grasping for breath. But by the time they got him to hospital, he had died".

Dudley was also known to have had close shaves filming in Africa, Pakistan and Iraq.

LEON KOK

- The writer and Saunders covered several international news events together in Namibia, Angola and abroad between 1978 and 1985, and were co-producers at the SABC in the late 1980s.