

SIMON NKOLI

b. November 26, 1957

d. November 30, 1998

SOUTH AFRICAN ACTIVIST

“I am black and I am gay. I cannot separate the two into secondary or primary struggles.”

Nkoli cofounded the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand (GLOW), the first national black LGBT organization in South Africa.

Simon Nkoli was a South African anti-apartheid, gay rights and AIDS activist. He is recognized as the founder of South Africa’s black gay movement.

Nkoli was born in Soweto. At a young age, he was sent to live on a farm with his grandparents to avoid apartheid. He spent any spare moment in the classroom. Eventually his thirst for education led him to attend school full-time.

At 18, Nkoli came out to his mother. She sent him to a priest to be “argued” out of it. After this and further attempts by psychologists and doctors proved unsuccessful, Nkoli’s mother allowed her son to move in with his boyfriend.

As an activist in the 1970s, he was arrested in the student uprisings against apartheid. In 1979, he joined the Congress of South African Students and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

In 1983, Nkoli—frustrated that most gay venues were in districts reserved for whites—joined the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA), a predominantly white organization. Because GASA would not relocate their activities outside of whites-only facilities, Nkoli founded the Saturday Group, South Africa’s first regional gay black organization.

For opposing apartheid, Nkoli and other UDF members were charged with treason. While awaiting sentencing, he came out to other UDF leaders, prompting them to recognize homophobia as oppression. In 1988, he and his co-defendants were acquitted. After his release, Nkoli cofounded the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand (GLOW), the first national black LGBT organization in South Africa.

In the 1990s, Nkoli worked with Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) to end apartheid. His visibility in the anti-apartheid movement and his association with Mandela helped the gay movement gain support from the ANC. In 1996, South Africa became the first nation to include sexual orientation protection in its constitution.

Nkoli was one of the first South Africans to publicly disclose his HIV status. He cofounded the Township AIDS Project and the Gay Men’s Health Forum. In 1998, he died from AIDS-related complications.



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