



## Minnaar Schluntz Nel

November 12, 1937 - January 20, 2023

Minnaar Schlüntz “Fiks” Nel, 85, passed away peacefully on January 20, 2023 at his home in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Fiks was born on November 12, 1937 in Benoni, South Africa. He spent his preschool years in Cape Town, later moving with his family to Bloemfontein where he was a weekly boarder at St Andrew’s Boys’ School during WWII. He was a natural athlete who loved swimming and set a South African record for under-12 butterfly during his time at St Andrew’s. After the war, his parents moved to Kimberly and Fiks became a full-time boarder at Dale College Boys High School in King William’s Town in the Eastern Cape. It was at Dale that rugby team-mates gave him his nickname “Fiks” after a popular Springbok rugby player of the time. “Fiks” is an Afrikaans word meaning “physically fit”. The nickname suited him and became the name he was best-known by for the rest of his life. After completing high school at Dale College, Fiks studied history and physical education at Stellenbosch University where he played water-polo and captained the swim team. His years as a “Matie” provided many cherished memories and stories as well as life-long friends.

While at Stellenbosch University, Fiks discovered Norman Vincent Peale’s book “The Power of Positive Thinking.” The book supported and reinforced beliefs that remained touchstones for him in all of the years ahead - the importance of physical fitness and health, the realization that happiness is a

choice that one must consciously make, the crucial role that gratitude plays in helping us achieve our goals, and the power of prayer. He always kept his original copy of the book, full of annotations and underlining and references that helped shape the person he became.

As a child, Fiks had pored over issues of National Geographic, dreaming of exploring as much of the world as he could. Following graduation from Stellenbosch University, a swimming scholarship to San José State University allowed him to begin. His arrival in the States was a goal fulfilled for him and he never stopped telling stories about his first taxi ride through New York City, embellishing them according to the audience and the mood of the day. He fell in love with the USA, often commenting on the ability of Americans to laugh at themselves. With the exception of a brief return to South Africa after graduation, he spent the following 10 years living and enjoying life in California.

While studying at San Jose, Fiks augmented his living allowance by coaching swimming at a local swim club while earning his master's degree in Physical Education. His success as a swim coach was built on teaching his swimmers to believe in themselves - setting goals, believing in their ability to reach them by working hard while having fun, and focusing on wins rather than defeats. These would become principles that he incorporated into everything he did - from business to marriage to parenting.

Fiks met his wife, Mary, in 1972. She knocked on his door one day while visiting a mutual friend in San Jose, and they spent a lot of time over the next several weeks getting to know each other. In spite of a 12-year age difference and very different backgrounds, they found that they were both more in step with their many shared values and dreams than many of the trends of the time. They were married in May 1973 and moved to South Africa the following fall. Fiks was excited to find a position as Regional Sales Manager with

Stellenbosch Farmers Winery (SFW) and they settled into life in Port Elizabeth where their first daughter, Sasha, was born. Fiks spent the rest of his work career with SFW. In 1975, he happily moved his family to Stellenbosch as National Sales Manager. Their daughter Heidi was born there and family life was good. Several years later, Fiks was made International Sales Manager, allowing him to indulge his love of travel while introducing SFW wines to new markets in Europe, the US, South America, and Japan.

In 1987, Fiks unexpectedly suffered a stroke that significantly impacted his memory and his awareness of time and space. The following years were difficult for the whole family as Fiks' brain injury was severe. It took months for him to begin to understand what had happened and years for him to begin to be comfortable with the person he had become. He was no longer able to work and it became Mary's responsibility to support the family. For many reasons, she chose to return to the United States, settling in Fort Collins, CO because of its access to both Colorado State University for herself and the Rocky Mountains for Fiks.

Over the years, Fiks' memory improved enough to make his days easier but, by and large, he coped by living in the present moment and by staying within established routines. As Fiks slowly found his way back to himself, he relied on the same principles he had throughout his life. He was grounded by his faith in God, reveled in his family, and was committed to physical wellness and fitness. Fiks had always stayed fit through weight-lifting and squash and one of the first things he and Mary did on arriving in Ft. Collins was to find him a gym for working out. The plan underwent several permutations and Mary was surprised one day to receive a call from a manager at Raintree Athletic Club (fka "Pulse) letting her know that Fiks was there and managing well. They welcomed him as a member of the club from 1991 until early 2020. He spent

almost every week-day morning there - enough time that Mary credits RAC management and members with providing the best support and therapy Fiks ever had. He always took pride in heavy squats and bench presses. As years went by, the lifting load lessened but he made many friends there and the social component always continued to bring him joy.

Fiks greeted every morning with the best smile he could muster and approached life with a deep sense of personal strength and gratitude. When asked about the challenges life had posed, he was quick to advise, "There are always obstacles in life. You need to be able to find your inner reserves to get you through them."

Fiks was an extraordinary person and embodied his name in both of his lives. In the first - the life that he chose - he was a determined, disciplined and results-oriented leader on and off the field. In the other - a life he learned to live - those who loved him watched as he fought his way back to knowing who he was and what he stood for. He continued to be someone who led by example and demonstrated the power of positive thinking in accepting and adapting to tragic circumstances with strength, humility, and grace. In both lives, he encouraged others to bring and to be their best, teaching us all that who you choose to be is more important than what you're able to do.

No one was ever more important to Fiks than his wife, Mary, and their daughters, Sasha Lynn Strohm and Heidi Alexis Nel-Rosser, and he will be dearly missed by them. He was always proud of and grateful for his sons-in-law, Jay Michael Strohm Jr. and Thomas (Tom) Stephen Rosser. He had only limited opportunities to know his grandchildren, Jack Michael Strohm (9), Nicholas Flynn Strohm (5), and Elin Rose Rosser (2), but stories about them and photos of them always put a smile on his face. If he could leave them a message, it would be, "Stay fit, treat others with respect, and always be kind and loving to your families and friends."

The family wants to thank the caregivers from Pathways Hospice who gave kind, consistent, and respectful care to Fiks during the past few months; Ashley Meng for her compassionate care and support; and good friends who over the years have made a difficult situation so much easier. A celebration of life will be held on Saturday, April 8 2023. Details will be shared at a later date. In lieu of flowers, please consider making a donation to Rocky Mountain Conservancy or Good Sports.

# Previous Events

## Celebration of Life

APR 8 (MT)

Bohlender Funeral Chapel  
121 W. Olive St.  
Fort Collins, CO 80524

# Tribute Wall

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“ I met Fiks in the early 1980's when my wine company (Grape Expectations) was attempting to get Stellenbosch wines in NYC accounts. Fiks sent me a couple of cases so I could take samples out to restaurants, which I did, the most notable being Windows on the World in the World Trade Center tower where Wine Director Kevin Zraly set me up with his staff for a tasting. I lost touch with Fiks but never forgot him and his passion for life and business (he later sent me books on South African wines). If the Nel family would like to contact me, please do, at [gab10@cornell.edu](mailto:gab10@cornell.edu)

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**gary a. brandt** - November 25, 2023 at 10:28 AM