Kathrada tells of freedom and pizza

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FREEDOM was won for young people to enjoy — while they uphold their responsibilities.

So said anti-apartheid stalwart Ahmed Kathrada during a talk to medical students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine on Friday.

“What we try to convey to young people is, enjoy yourselves, enjoy your freedom . . . but remember that with freedom comes responsibility. Freedom did not fall from heaven.”

Kathrada was speaking at a special presentation to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his release from prison and his 85th birthday in August.

He said young people must take advantage of the opportunity to study, as did the political prisoners on Robben Island. There were no certificates, he said, but “nobody left Robben Island illiterate”.

Kathrada said some effects of apartheid remained but the youth should not use this as an excuse to fail. Poverty and hunger were two of the challenges still facing South Africa.

“We can’t leave everything to the government. We are only 20 years old as a democracy. Any government, in 20 years, can achieve only so much and not more.”

Kathrada said it was “unfortunate” that the Mazibuye African Forum was making statements that divided KwaZulu-Natal along racial lines.

“People should know better. If they’ve got a problem, there are avenues open to them to talk about it. It’s unfortunate that it has come to this.”

He recalled some of the funnier aspects of prison life on Robben Island.

“Having been deprived of freedom of speech for so long, we try to make up for the loss,” he said, before sharing his memories.

One of the worst things about life on Robben Island was the rationing out of food based on race by prison authorities, which the political prisoners thwarted by putting all their food together and redistributing it equally.

“As time went on, things became a bit more relaxed . . . so that when my lawyer came to see me he would bring two packets of samoosas. During the years at Pollsmoor, we tasted every food. But I had to wait until I got out for this thing they called ‘pizza’.”

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