

Reflections on Nicola Colangelo – a simple man, a business genius, a wise and generous soul

A few minutes before noon on Monday 24th July 2017, a friend sent a whatsapp message to the CEOrt group chat informing us of the terrible news of the passing of Tanzanian Italian businessman Nicola Colangelo. I had known of Nicola's struggle with a terminal illness for quite sometime but hoped he would beat it and return to Dar. Nicola and I had exchanged messages of hope and a possible reunion in Italy in September only days before he finally gave up the fight. I was saddened by the news and as the week wore on with an endless stream of sorrowful eulogies circulating in the media, I realised the best way to deal with the sadness that was engulfing me was to reflect on and celebrate what I have learned from the man over the last twenty five years of friendship.

Nicola will be remembered by all who knew him for the vast business empire he built in Tanzania over the last half century. Many have spoken of his super size vision, his incredible business acumen, his generosity, his wisdom and his love for family and the many friends he made during his life. All that is true and possibly understated because he combined all those qualities and more.

However, of all of Nicola's traits, it is his simplicity and irrepressible humor that I will miss the most. Every time I ran into Nicola at a function and it happened to be one of those rare occasions when he would be wearing a suit and tie; he would be quick to say:

“Ali, don't laugh. I know this suit doesn't fit me. I have borrowed it from my security guard”; after which we would both heartily laugh, not least because it was true the suit was a poor fit but also knowing him, I wouldn't put it beyond him to borrow his askari's suit for the occasion. The joke was repeated without fail every time he found himself at an event in a suit. Nicola had little time for formality in general and for the formal dress in particular. He seemed uncomfortable in formal surroundings and was always impatient get back to his more relaxed ways. He was most at ease in casual open neck cotton shirts, khaki pants and open shoes. His office set up was simple, almost austere with high quality wooden furniture that he made in one of his many companies.

Thousands of people walking through his vast Slipway complex on Dar es Salaam's Msasani Peninsula on any given weekend could walk right past him without recognising he was not only the owner of the place but also the creative genius behind its beautiful design, the builder and operations overseer all in one.

My fascination with Nicola's simplicity however, extends beyond his choice of clothing. He lived a simple yet full life. He demonstrated that creation of wealth must not necessarily lead to one being submerged in and consumed by it. In the more than twenty five years I knew him, I don't recall ever seeing him driving a new car or sporting an expensive watch. He didn't care about these things. He showed all who

were interested that wealth is nothing but a tool for doing good, useful only if it can serve a useful purpose in the wider community. That's why he seemed to be at his happiest when giving his time and resources to social causes. I worked on some of these causes with him and could not stop being amazed by the keen interest, patience, time and money he invested in these causes. The man who grew up in poverty and came to Tanzania aged 18 as an equipment operator for an Italian construction firm has achieved what most of us can only dream of and yet remained authentic and unchanged by his wealth, not a mean feat in a city where the slightest amount of financial success can have a transformative effect on people's personalities.

He always showed up on time for the CEOrt Board meetings, walked up the four flights of stairs to the Infotech Boardroom – apparently he didn't trust elevators which is quite funny since many buildings in the country operate elevators installed by his company – and made the most insightful contributions to the many policy ideas that our group has considered over the years. He would stay on for a chat after the formal business and never took a call during meetings. His ability to focus on what he was doing was remarkable.

As he leaves the stage for the last time, I will treasure the lessons of humility and simplicity that are Nicola's most memorable contribution to my own personal growth as a businessman, husband and father.

I do not have the words to thank him for sharing this beautiful side of his personality with me. I will celebrate his life and pass on his teachings to future generations.

Go well my friend and see you again Insha' Allah

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