



# South African National Society

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## **NEWS BRIEF 044 – OBITUARY HUGH ROBERT THOMPSON (1938 – 2016)**

In July this year the SA National Society lost one of its great members so we asked Robert King to write an obituary. Please feel free to share this with others whom you know had interests in common with Hugh for he had certainly been a great support to many people and organisations during his extremely full life. And to clear a question before it is asked, as far as it could be established there was no family connection between Barbara Tyrrell the artist, and Hugh's family.

Hugh was born in Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape, the second child of Albert Hugh and Lillian Rose (nee Tyrrell) Thompson. His sister, Barbara Tyrrell Thompson (1934- 2003), was four years his senior. Although they fought, like most siblings, Barbara and Hugh remained very close all their lives, and fiercely loyal to each other. Barbara never ceased looking after her "little" brother.

Hugh's paternal grandfather was a baker in Uitenhage, who died when Hugh's father (the youngest in the family) was still at school, resulting in him leaving school to acquire a trade. His paternal grandmother was of German settler stock, and lived to her nineties, still chopping wood for the coal stove to the end of her life.

Hugh's maternal grandfather did not recover from the mental and physical injuries he suffered during the First World War. His maternal grandmother, who had been born in India, returned to South Africa (where they had lived before the war) with her daughter, son and a relative that she had adopted. She had trained as a nurse, obtaining her midwifery certificate in 1901. Hugh's grandmother lived to just short of her 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday, having married, and outlived three husbands (a fact she asked her daughter not to repeat, as it made her sound "sexy").

When Hugh was still very young the family moved to Pretoria, where his father, a Fitter and Turner on the railways, was transferred because of the outbreak of the Second World War. An enduring happy memory for the children was their yearly train trip to Uitenhage to visit the "grandmothers". When Hugh was five, the family was transferred to Pietermaritzburg. Barbara was enrolled at the Sisters of the Precious Blood Convent (St Anne's), Loop Street. Hugh was desperately lonely. Consequently, Hugh, although too young, was enrolled in class 1. He was proud of having spent eighteen months in class 1 and retained happy memories and associations of his convent education.

Primary school was Merchiston School, then next to the Commercial Road cemetery. Pupils stopped doing whatever they were doing and took off their caps, as the hearses went past. While Hugh was at Merchiston the 1947 Royal Visit took place. Although now midway through primary school, Hugh (because he was so small) was put in the front row, with the class 1s, ensuring him a perfect view of the royal party as they passed by, and his photograph in the newspaper. He then went on to Maritzburg College, where he matriculated, with a first class pass, in 1955. At College he began his lifelong passion for the theatre, participating in school plays and later professional productions.

Hugh went to the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), gaining a BA honours in geography and acquiring a University Teaching Diploma. On graduation, he was appointed to teach geography, English, vocational guidance and mathematics, (despite not having done mathematics at university - he said the superb grounding in mathematics he had received at Maritzburg College stood him in good stead), at Glenwood High School in 1960. At Glenwood he quickly became involved in school productions, as well as continuing to perform professionally.

Hugh was small in stature, having a slightly large head for his size, average torso, but short limbs. This was inherited from his mother, who was barely four foot tall, though none of his immediate family were big people. However, he was big in personality, rarely giving the impression of a lack of height. He was always a very vital, energetic personality, belying his age and playing juvenile roles in theatre productions until he was nearly thirty. Like many short people, Hugh had a very short fuse and his anger could be electrifying. However, this was more than compensated, by his warm, outgoing personality, and his enormous courtesy, irrespective of who you were. His friends remained friends for life. He loved giving to people, both gifts and of his time. He really enjoyed helping people, and it was never too much trouble, even if he had to forgo something himself. He was also remarkably intelligent and could speak knowledgeably about the arts, classics, nature, indigenous gardening and current affairs, the list is unending. He was never arrogant but made people want to find out more for themselves.

He was a voracious reader, artist (painting and sculpture), but his greatest love was the theatre. Hugh was in many professional productions in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and frequently went on tour with the production he was in. He liked to quip that only female role he played was Nanna in "Peter Pan"- type cast he would hasten to agree. The shows he was involved in are too numerous to mention. Hugh had a fund of amusing stories about his theatre experiences. He later concentrated on producing plays and stage make up. The late Elizabeth Sneddon encouraged Hugh to leave secondary school teaching and take up a post in the University of Natal (Durban) drama department in 1966. He was already studying drama part time. In 1968 he obtained his BA Honours degree in Drama.

After a short return to teaching, English, at Pinetown Boys' High school in 1983, he was appointed lecturer, later Head of Speech and Drama at the new Edgewood Teachers' Training College, still based initially at DOKKIES, before the new buildings were completed at Pinetown. At DOKKIES Hugh became totally bilingual in Afrikaans as well as English. He never did things by half measure. Many former lecturers and students have fond, often hilarious memories, of Hugh at Edgewood and the shows he produced (both in English and Afrikaans). He was then appointed Drama Subject Advisor, firstly in Pietermaritzburg, then in Durban. Once again Hugh is fondly remembered by colleagues and the countless pupils who passed through his capable hands over the years.

Retirement did not last long for Hugh. He had too much to offer. He was asked to help out teaching Drama and English at St Benedict's School at Pinetown. He remained happily teaching at St Benedict's until 2013, when school policy dictated that he was nearly nine years beyond their stipulated retirement age and to his fury his contract was not renewed. While at St Benedict's, Hugh a passionate animal lover all his life (particularly cats) and which animals spontaneously returned, adopted his last feline "child", Ben. (Ben, named after St Benedict's, was a kitten found hiding under the former nun's house). Ben became central to Hugh's life and fortunately has now happily settled with Hugh's neighbour, Pat Liversage, without a major upheaval in to his life.

For Hugh there was no such thing as sitting back in retirement. For years he read for Tape Aids for the Blind, eventually as often as three or more mornings a week. He belonged to various cultural

and historical organisations like the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa, the Speech and Drama Guild, UKZN Alumni Association, the South African National society and the Highway Heritage Society, to name but a few. He was also a much sought after judge and adjudicator for various speech competitions and for a number of years ran the Shakespeare Competition. To all these organisations he gave his complete dedication plus being a much sought after guest speaker by many organisations.

In June Hugh had an, at first, undetected heart attack. On eventually consulting the doctor, he underwent an angiogram. While in hospital he suffered a second heart attack. On 19<sup>th</sup> July he had a triple by-pass operation. Released from hospital on the 25<sup>th</sup> July, to recuperate at Robert King's home in Everton, he suffered another heart attack on the 27<sup>th</sup> July and very suddenly and peacefully went to sleep. Hugh left hundreds, possibly thousands of friends, past colleague and pupils/students totally shocked. Hugh was always so young at heart and vital that people could not believe he had died. The tributes to Hugh have been innumerable and heartfelt as was the celebration of his life at the wake following, at his bequest, a private cremation.

Hugh touched many lives and left a multitude of people with special memories of a very special person and often humble man.

As Horatio says of the dead Hamlet:

“Good-night sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!”

**Robert King  
Gowrie  
September 2016**