

Abdullah Gangraker: From family grocer to iconic 'Mr Wembley'

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1943-2016

ABDULLAH Gangraker, who has died in Cape Town at the age of 72, turned a small grocery shop started by his father in 1931 into one of Cape Town's most iconic businesses.

The Wembley Group of Companies includes the only specialist marshmallow manufacturer in the country, a travel agency, meat market, a food services business that supplies a string of private hospitals, a fast-food outlet, a cash and carry store, one of the largest independent supermarkets in the Western Cape and one of the first to introduce price scanning, a bakery and the most famous roadhouse on the Cape Flats.

His father, Mohamed Eshack Gangraker, came to South Africa in 1910 from Morba, a poor rural village 240km south of what was then Bombay in India, looking for a better life.

In 1931, he opened EO Gangraker Stores in Athlone, which he renamed Wembley Stores after a popular local soccer team

of the day on the advice of the young men who used to gather regularly outside his shop.

Gangraker was born on October 28 1943.

He practically lived in the shop as a small boy, performing menial chores, sweeping, packing and doing deliveries.

This continued during his schooling until he matriculated at Alexander Sinton High School in 1964.

In 1971, his father died and he took over the store and began expanding. Under apartheid the government bent over backwards to smooth the way for white, particularly Afrikaans, businesses, and made life as difficult as it could for blacks.

Gangraker decided to open a butchery, but permission was denied by the Meat Control Board several times. When he threatened legal action the necessary licence was grudgingly granted. The butchery opened in 1975.

This was also the year he opened the famous Wembley roadhouse, which became something of a landmark.



PHILANTHROPIST: Cape Town businessman Abdullah Gangraker in his butchery
Picture: AMBROSE PETERS

Then he waged a three-and-a-half-year battle with the apartheid government to build a mosque. He purchased prime land in Athlone for the purpose, but permission was denied, typically with no reasons given. Gangraker sent a petition to the authorities signed by more than 3 000 people who said the mosque would fulfil a great need in the community.

In 1981, the Masjidul-Quds mosque was finally completed.

Gangraker, widely and affectionately known in Cape Town as "Mr Wembley", attached great importance to philanthropic projects. He built a school hall for Islamia College, one of the leading Muslim schools in the country; donated golf carts to Groote Schuur Hospital to transport patients;

started a cricket league for youngsters on the Cape Flats; and sponsored a home through SOS Children's Villages.

During the struggle against apartheid he provided free food for striking workers, and he organised and financed athletics events and cricket tournaments under the banner of the anti-apartheid South African Council of Sport.

He didn't forget his ancestral home either, helping to build hospitals, schools and mosques in his father's village.

In 2008, he was among the top five nominees for company of the year and businessman of the year at the FNB Islamic Financial Awards.

Gangraker is survived by his wife, Fatima, and six children.
— Chris Barron

SUNDAY TIMES - 3/7/2016

Collection Number: AG3403

Collection Name: Non-racial Sports History Project

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

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