

Three lessons in activism from Mark Weinberg

By Murray Hunter

4 February 2025

Mark Weinberg: 5 January 1974 to 28 January 2025.

There is no single person who could be described as the founder of the Right2Know Campaign, but Mark Weinberg, who died of a heart attack on 28 January, came the closest. It was far from his only work, but the near-decade he spent working to build a movement for the free flow of information left its mark on South Africa, on civic space, and certainly on me.

He was involved in left-wing student politics at Wits, worked as a media officer for the SA NGO Coalition in its heyday, and spent years as a community media activist prior to Right2Know. His grandparents Eli and Violet Weinberg and his mother Sheila Weinberg were all part of the liberation struggle and went through various bannings and detentions.

Mark was a mentor, comrade and friend. I was 24 when I joined the Right2Know Campaign, and he was younger than I am now. I'm struggling to come to terms with his death, and I am in no position to make sense of his life. But I can reflect on three things I learned from him, and share them.

The power of people

Mark's belief in movement-building was a hallmark of his activism. This was both a moral conviction (that every voice should be heard) and a practical calculation (that only a mass movement of people can force lasting social change).

The Right2Know Campaign reflected this instinct. In 2010, as the first signs of the creeping security politics of the Zuma era had already started to appear, state law makers introduced the Protection of State Information Bill, a policy proposal that would expand the powers of a new government structure called the State Security Agency. The initial concerns tabled by traditional policy groups were simply shrugged off. In their place sprung the Right2Know, a broad, raucous and chaotic coalition of NGOs, social movements, veteran campaigners and first-time activists. Many people helped to make this happen, but Mark was at the centre.

For the uninitiated, the internal culture of the Right2Know was insane. The meetings were open to anyone committed to attending. The programmes and budgets could be shaped by all who chose to participate. Across competing ideologies, and the vast social boundaries of race, gender, language, geography, an organisation took shape. Its agenda grew too: from the first days, Mark was among those who saw the opportunity (and the need) to expand from a single-issue campaign (to stop the "Secrecy Bill") to a social movement that put information rights at the centre of broader struggles for social justice. Or, to put it less loftily: Mark was committed to making the right to know a bread-and-butter issue.

Mark was a committed Marxist, but by the time I met him he was also a coalition-builder, capable of overlooking Big P political differences for the greater good. He only seemed to need two things to call you his comrade: a commitment to non-chauvinism (no tolerance for sexism, racism, xenophobic nationalism etc) and a commitment to this messy democratic culture, painful as it could be.

This went against the instincts of some policy wonks – well-meaning people who possibly struggled with the idea that a room full of people without the “right” expertise could really deliver the right kind of change, or at least felt that this slow form of organising was not as efficient as just sending a small group of carefully selected experts to lobby the right policymaker.

It could certainly be painful. Meetings ran long; conflicts erupted. But he had a maddening tolerance for it. I once railed to Mark about some difficult character in our structures – a comrade who turned every discussion into an argument and whose every thought became a manifesto-length email. (I genuinely can’t remember who it was – possibly because the list of suspects is so long.) “But he’s such an arsehole,” I complained. “Yes,” said Mark happily, “but he’s our arsehole.”

But when it worked, it worked. The Right2Know became, for a time, a formidable social force – securing high-profile wins like stopping the Secrecy Bill, but also injecting new energy and agency to grassroots social struggles playing out far away from national headlines. Just as importantly, at its best the Right2Know embodied the kind of collectivist organising that Mark cherished. I remember an observer at one of our elective conferences, who after sitting through two days of debates and discussions among dozens of activists, remarked that she couldn’t figure out who Right2Know’s leaders were. She meant it as a compliment – that leadership was distributed widely across our structures. Mark loved this.

Politics as an expression of love

Mark fiercely believed in the idea of activism as an act of love. His vision for a better world was driven by love – for his children, Liam, Luke and Sasha, and his partner Celeste, but really for everyone who would experience it.

I won’t lionise him: he got tired, he got angry, and he certainly felt despair. Not only at the injustice in the world around him, but at us as well – he carried so much of the excruciating weight of this messy organisation, and when conflict blossomed, Mark was often its target. Yet in the relentless slog of activism and the grind of organisational life, Mark somehow always stayed connected – even tenuously – to the love that drove his work.

He found joy in all sorts of places. He was always plotting some new political stunt or advocacy tool – often dreamed up over a cigarette on the front steps of Community House, where R2K was headquartered. For a while he hosted a talk show on Cape Town TV, combining his passion for community media with his love of comically uncomfortable couches.

Years before an influencer sparked the #DataMustFall campaign, Mark orchestrated marches against price gouging by Vodacom and MTN as a free speech issue. He talked seriously about launching a non-profit phone network across the Cape Flats.

But while his heart was at the barricades, his head was often buried in spreadsheets, funder reports, and a crushing load of emails. Very often he took solace in the idea that he was creating space for other people’s activism, and that working on his spreadsheets and funder reports was his contribution to the struggle. He even forced himself to find joy in these. (Anyone who has worked with Mark would have seen him hunched impossibly close to a laptop screen, his scraggly goatee practically touching the keyboard as he puzzled over some intricate budgeting formula, before suddenly bolting up in triumph when he cracked the problem.)

Nothing lasts forever – and that's okay

Mark did not seem to fear change. When I once asked how Right2Know's coalition was built, he seemed to describe it as one temporary expression of an ever-evolving progressive politics.

"We've always been here," he said. "We just had a different name. And when this organisation is gone, we'll be something else."

I remember being horrified at this casual acknowledgment that organisations should die – much less ours. But Mark knew from the start that organisations, like people, come and go; causes flourish and fade. He knew to celebrate every victory, however small; he knew to weather every defeat, however stinging.

Right2Know did eventually fade somewhat, though it continues to operate. Its open structures, once a source of the organisation's vitality, became a haven for people who had been cast out of every other struggle. The low-grade internal conflicts, once a source of its dynamism, became an all-consuming part of its culture. For some, the bruising experience may have been a cautionary tale about the risks of working too democratically, of letting too many people into the room or ceding too much control.

I know Mark drew many lessons from Right2Know's failures, and no small amount of trauma – but I don't believe he ever truly gave up on his belief in the power of building a new world together.

Mark is gone, but these lessons remain for any of us to carry them forward. It's no easy task, but I believe he saw in each of us the same capacity for love, the same commitment to unity, and the same promise of a better world.

This article was syndicated from GroundUp (<https://www.groundup.org.za/>) and was originally published on 4 February 2025. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the author, and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article (<https://groundup.org.za/article/three-lessons-in-activism-from-mark-weinberg/>).