

Memorial Service in Honour of Nelson Mandela

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University of Pretoria

The Chancellor, Professor Nkhulu, members of the University of Pretoria community, our staff, our students, and our President of the Convocation, Mr Haese, my colleagues from the Executive, Faculty Deans, Directors.

I thank you very much for being present this morning, despite the fact that most of our staff are currently on their annual leave and our students have concluded the academic year. Thank you for joining us.

Colleagues and students, since the passing away of our great leader, former President Nelson Mandela, last week on the 5th of December – someone who was celebrated and lauded by all South Africans and the world as a whole – I have noted, and so have you I'm sure, that from the moment the news was announced publicly, each of us in our own way have reflected on what his leadership has meant to us.

Members of the public have called in on the various radio stations; newspapers have published eulogies and tributes. Some of us may have done this silently and less publicly.

On our programme today we have our two presiding officers, both Emeritus Professors of the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Theology. Each of them in their own way may reflect on how Madiba's legacy has changed us. So too can our Chancellor, Professor Nkhulu, who worked with and knew Madiba personally; also Professor Denver Hendricks who decided to forego his annual leave to be back at the University to plan this event. (In fact, Professor Hendricks served as Chief Director in the first democratic government under President Nelson Mandela.)

Colleagues and students, I too have had moments of reflection. But today in addressing you, I wish to reflect briefly, in my capacity as Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Pretoria, on what his legacy means for us as a University.

I wish to focus on the question: What does Mr Mandela's legacy mean for us here at this particular University, at this particular time in our history? I believe it is an important time for us as a campus community to reflect on what the legacy of Mr Mandela teaches us as we mourn his death and celebrate the values that his life embodied.

Firstly, I wish to say I recognise that if it had not been for Mr Mandela's fight for justice for us, the door would not have been open for someone like me to take the role of Vice-Chancellor and Principal at this great institution. So, at the outset, I wish to acknowledge that Mr Mandela opened doors for myself and for many of us to become part of this community at UP, or Tuks as it is commonly referred to, and for that I am deeply grateful.

It is a time for us to look back on our history and to think about what Nelson Mandela means for the University of Pretoria. And as I look back through the archives of our history, I want to refer to the first time that Mr Mandela visited the University of Pretoria, long before I became part of this campus community.

He was invited by a group of students in April 1991, barely one year after his release from prison. He was invited by students to address firstly the student body and also the campus community. From the memories that have endured over the years, including the memories of some of my colleagues whom I continue to work with, there was great excitement amongst the campus community that they would have the opportunity to listen first hand to the views of the man about whom they had learned so much, a man who was imprisoned for so long for his political beliefs and actions.

But sadly, Mr Mandela never delivered his address on that occasion here at the University of Pretoria. The record shows that he had to be hurried off this very stage because of the disruption by a group of students who stormed the stage. Because the organisers feared for his safety, they decided not to continue with the address. Even though he did not deliver it, his address was prepared for his first visit to the University of Pretoria and is now in the South African History Archives. I encourage you to take a moment or two to read that address. He would have delivered his address beginning in Afrikaans and then changing to English. His focus was to be on the ideals of non-racialism, equal rights and the cornerstones of the values that are enshrined in the Freedom Charter. He would have said "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white." He would have gone on to talk about the importance of cultural, linguistic and religious freedom.

UP students who were part of organising the event, many of whom are now, dare I say, middle aged or in the middle phase of their lives, recall with mixed feelings the decision they had to make on the

day. But that same group of students and staff here at the University of Pretoria continued to ensure that the campus climate changed, and looking back I can now stand here very proudly and say that it did change.

It was six years later at the University of Pretoria that the campus climate had changed to such an extent that on the 4th of December 1997, this University bestowed an Honorary Doctorate in Law on Mr Mandela. The University officially recognised him for his contribution to justice, peace, reconciliation and democracy in South Africa, and for his exemplary contribution to the well-being of our country and of all humankind. After this occasion, Mr Mandela visited the University again in 2009 on the occasion of the graduation of his grandson.

In my capacity as Vice-Chancellor and Principal, and as I look back at those records and the legacy of Mr Nelson Mandela as a citizen and as a leader, I see that there is a parallel narrative or a parallel lesson for us as a campus community today. It is a lesson that we should reflect on and take very seriously in terms of how it affects us individually and collectively.

If we look back at the journey of Mr Mandela, and his leadership journey in particular, we see that many decades ago his voice was initially on the margins. Many of the great nations of the world were represented in the stadium yesterday at the official memorial service. In the 1950s and 60s, they did not express unequivocal support for the values and the vision he espoused at that particular period in our history.

Of course this led to his imprisonment. But he was unwavering, as we all know, in terms of his fight for human rights, his fight for equality and justice for all. What this meant was that, over time, his voice became louder and louder. He could not be silenced.

If I may look back at the history of the University of Pretoria beginning in 1908, more than a hundred years ago, the University was for a long time known as an exclusively white, Afrikaans institution. In fact, it was only in the 1980s that UP officially reopened its doors to all races.

What is less known about the campus community is that, even in the time of exclusion, there had always been a voice amongst staff and students of the University of Pretoria that called for equality and justice. Yes, the voice was often a small one, often not heard, and much of it may not be officially recorded in our archives. As staff and students, I encourage you to read the records because there are several instances where staff and students, firmly loyal and deeply committed to this institution, stood up with courage and spoke out when times were extremely difficult, and there were negative consequences for doing so. For example, our archives show that in 1956, 13

University of Pretoria academics publicly objected to the Amendment to the Voters' Roll, an amendment that at the time excluded members of the South African public who were categorised as 'coloured'. Many of them faced negative consequences for doing so in terms of their career, but they did indeed stand up.

The Centre for Human Rights, established at this University over 25 years ago, now stands as one of our flagship departments of which I continue to be proud. Our Centre for Human Rights has made significant contributions to human rights in South Africa and beyond, and continues to do so. Indeed, if we look back at the records, members of the Centre for Human Rights played a major role in the development of the Constitution of which we all are proud as South African citizens.

Yesterday we held a graduation ceremony. It was for the Faculty of Law graduating students who have passed the Masters in Human Rights in Africa. On this occasion we bestowed an Honorary Doctorate to Justice van der Westhuizen, someone who was one of those who stood up with courage when the time called.

So as we look back at our history, I want us to recognise the individual staff members and students who, even when times were difficult, stood up with courage the way that Mr Mandela did in his call for equality and justice. From small beginnings (sometimes the voice was hardly heard) that voice here at the University of Pretoria grew louder and louder. Today this voice and the values of fairness, anti-discrimination and justice are enshrined in all our policies and procedures, and in our institutional culture.

Although we may celebrate the long journey that we've travelled – yes, we've come a long way – I think it is also a moment for us to reflect on the transformation journey ahead of us, and to ask ourselves: "What more do we need to do as individuals and as a campus community?"

I want to take the opportunity to make some brief suggestions in sharing my views.

Firstly, we must continue to do all we can to give opportunities to talented young people, particularly the most disadvantaged amongst our South African communities. We need to do this as a public institution, particularly recognising the call of Mr Mandela that education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world and reshape the future positively. We therefore must continue to grow responsibly but at the same time make sure that we will do all we can to provide academic opportunities at the highest level of quality.

We also have to look at the nature of our campus community and at the nature of our institutional culture, and ask ourselves whether the values espoused by Madiba are truly embedded in our day to day lives as we relate to one another as colleagues, as students and staff, and as friends.

We must also ensure that this University remains and will always be a place where people can enjoy the freedom to hear and engage with viewpoints that may be different from our own. We should not ever have a time again where we invite somebody to share their views, and at the same time not give them the opportunity for an exchange of ideas (except hate speech, of course). That is what I believe defines a university: creating the opportunity for debate and dialogue.

This commitment must remain at the heart of who we are as a University: the ability to listen, to respect, and particularly to try to empathise with those who have views different from ourselves, even when it is difficult to do so. For that reason, we have launched the *Rea-a-bua* initiative this year to create opportunities for dialogue. I wish to encourage and would like to see all staff and students participate in this initiative in 2014. Myself, together with all Executive members, will be doing so. I would like to see each of us committing a small portion of our time in participating.

As staff and students you all know about our long-term strategy, UP 2025. Some staff and students tell me it is very ambitious, given the challenges we face on a day-to-day basis. We want to grow as an institution by providing opportunities for talented students and talented young people. This means we will grow in size and scale. At the same time we are striving to grow in academic excellence and stature. I recognised that it is a tough call, but what inspires me is also something perhaps less quoted that Madiba said to all of us: “There is no passion to be found in playing small, in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of.”

I believe that the University of Pretoria is capable of being an institution that is much greater than the institution we are today. We should not settle for being second, or third, or fourth in any measure that we may choose to use. We must aspire to being the kind of institution that is greater than the one we are today, and I sincerely believe we have the potential and capability to do so.

What I wish the University to achieve in the time that I am here as Vice-Chancellor and Principal, and perhaps in the time that you are here either as a staff member or as a student, is for all to do everything we can to ensure that when the future leaders of this institution – the staff and students of the future – celebrate the University’s second centenary (it is a long time ahead!), they will look back with a sense of undiluted pride that the University of Pretoria did all it could in contributing to

the growth and development of this nation. Our historic legacy is that we have to live up to the world's expectations about a country that had the privilege of a leader such as Mr Nelson Mandela.

That is why I am appealing to all of us: each of us, in our own respective ways, needs to do everything we can to ensure that when this institution reaches that point, everyone, regardless of race, religion or language, can look back with a sense of pride and say that the second century in the life of this institution was indeed the century that makes us prouder than the first century.

That is my call to each and every one of us, to ensure that the vision of Mr Nelson Mandela is realised.

I wish to conclude on behalf of all of us as a campus community to share our deep sense of sadness at the loss of our greatest leader, and particularly to express our sympathy to his family, his close friends and his comrades.

We are grateful for the legacy of Mr Nelson Mandela.

Thank you.
