



RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

RHODES UNIVERSITY 2013

**VICE-CHANCELLOR'S GRADUATION CEREMONIES
AND CHANCELLOR'S INSTALLATION ADDRESS**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

18.00: 5 April 2013

OFFICE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

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Introduction

The Chancellor, Justice Lex Mpati

The Chairperson of the Rhodes University Council, Judge Jones, and members of the Council

The Chairperson of the Rhodes University Convocation, Reverend Simon Gqubule

The Public Orator, Distinguished Prof. Paul Maylam

Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Registrar, Heads of Departments and academic and support staff colleagues

Members of the Students Representative Council

New graduates, and families and guardians of graduates

Dignitaries, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Molweni, dumelang, good morning, jambo, goeie more, sanibonani

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this graduation ceremony, at which we acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of the new graduates of Rhodes University.

Apart from the joy of a graduation ceremony, this morning is special for another reason. With his installation last night, we also introduce to you the new Chancellor of the University, Justice Lex Mpati.

Recognition

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate you, our new graduates, on your tremendous achievement.

To be awarded a degree, diploma or certificate from Rhodes University entails dedicated endeavour.

When you joined us you were told that at Rhodes learning and education is a partnership of mutual commitment: to the pursuit of wisdom, knowledge and understanding, to the development of expertise and skills, and to the embrace of appropriate values and attitudes.

Your graduation this evening is testimony that you have fulfilled your side of the partnership. You have displayed the necessary commitment to learn, to acquire and produce knowledge and to develop expertise.

You will, I trust, acknowledge the contributions of your lecturers and tutors, of laboratory and computer technicians, of administrators and wardens, and of cooks, cleaners and gardeners. All of these people have laboured to create a special intellectual, social and physical environment at Rhodes to support you and to enable you to succeed.

You will, hopefully, also recognize your parents, guardians, families, sponsors and benefactors, all of whom have contributed generously to your receiving a Rhodes education and to your graduating this evening.

Your alma mater

You, our graduands, have had the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university, one that deservedly commands an enviable academic reputation nationally and internationally.

We celebrate that we are an environment in which knowledge and the intellect can flower. We take pride in our commitment to the pursuit of equity and excellence; that we are a cosmopolitan institution with students from 62 countries, and that we are one of Africa's leading postgraduate and research universities that also takes undergraduate studies seriously.

We rejoice that we enjoy among the best pass and graduation rates in South Africa; that we have among the most highly qualified academic staff and the best research output per academic staff member, and that we pursue socially committed and mutually respectful and beneficial engagements with various communities.

Beginning this evening, over 3 days, 2 288 students will graduate at 5 graduation ceremonies. Given that we have only some 7 200 students, this is by far the best graduation rate among South African universities.

1 340 students will receive undergraduate degrees, and 948, or 41% postgraduate degrees. 1 378 graduates or 60% are women. 495 or 22% are international students from 30 countries in the rest of Africa and around the world. We also celebrate a new University record of 63 PhD's – a fabulous achievement for the smallest university in the country!

Our graduates

You, our graduates, are among the most talented of our society. It is to you that we look to lead, to re-imagine and reshape our future, to forge just and humane ways of conducting our affairs, and to ensure that reason, people, human development and social justice are at the heart of all of our conduct and actions.

We look to you to exercise, with humility, leadership wherever you find yourself – in the classrooms and schools of our lands; in the theatres, galleries and concert halls; in hospital and clinic dispensaries; in the media, legal practices and courts; in financial services and the public service; in scientific laboratories and research institutions and universities.

Of course, this leadership and your knowledge and expertise must be put to work not only for your private benefit but also for the benefit of society at large, to advance the general public good, so that all our people may lead decent, fulfilling and productive lives.

Once you receive your degree, diploma or certificate, you become part of the community of Old Rhodians. I welcome you to this ever-growing and diverse and international community, and I invite you to visit the alumni table in the Monument foyer to receive a special graduation gift.

In the years ahead we look forward to applauding your successes and achievements as Old Rhodians. We will especially celebrate if as alumni you don't forget your alma mater, and contribute generously to our Alumni Annual Fund and other fundraising efforts.

During the past few years, you have benefitted from a spectacular new R75 million library, a new postgraduate commons, 5 new residences and the new Desmond Tutu dining hall.

In the next three years we will build with alumni, state and corporate support a new R110 million Life Science building, a R30 million new School of Languages building, a new R17 million building for teacher education, and a new undergraduate and postgraduate residence at a cost of R 40 million.

In as much as we are an outstanding university and aspire to even greater heights we are, alas, a relatively poor university. Your support is vital if we are to continue producing knowledge to invigorate economic and social development, if we are to continue educating to the full new generations of students, and if we are to continue serving our society and continent.

This evening, however, is your evening, to remember, to celebrate and cherish. No doubt the parties will extend long into the night and there will be many fond memories and much merriment. You have earned it and I wish you a wonderful and joyful night (day, night...) of celebration of your achievement and your future promise.

Ladies and gentlemen, in any one's life a graduation ceremony like that of this evening is a great occasion. In some communities, such a graduation ceremony - Ukuthweswa isidanga, ho apara purapura, umyezane – is of especially profound significance.

With your graduation you are a living symbol of hurdles overcome. You have made history but are also on the threshold of making more history. You now take on a new identity and a new mantle. And with it you assume new and greater responsibilities. With the celebrations that follow, you enter into a new covenant with your immediate and the general South African community.

Some graduates of Rhodes University, opposed to segregated universities and apartheid as a matter of conscience boycotted graduation ceremonies prior to 1994.

Some of our alumni, therefore, have never enjoyed the experience of graduation, have never had family and friends bear witness to their graduation, have never had public acknowledgement of their graduation from Rhodes.

In recognition of their principled stand and great sacrifice during the apartheid period, we have a standing invitation to such alumni to participate in any of our graduation ceremonies.

This evening we are pleased to have with us Russel John Dor, who completed a BA (Psychology & English) in 1989, but for political reasons had to escape the country and take refuge in Botswana.

We hope Russel that this evening will be for you a kind of restorative justice, of healing and, of course, also celebration. Finally, in the presence of your family and friends, there can be public acknowledgment of your graduation from Rhodes University.

Chancellor Justice Mpati

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Late last year, our much admired Chancellor for fourteen years, Prof Jakes Gerwel, who was an outstanding academic, intellectual, citizen and leader passed away. His wisdom and character will be dearly missed.

We are, however, blessed that another outstanding son of the Eastern Cape, the Honourable Justice Lex Mpati, has agreed to pick up the baton.

From petrol attendant, bar-person, and furniture shop salesperson to President of the Supreme Court of Appeal. This has been the career path of Justice Lex Mpati, in a few moments to be installed as Chancellor of Rhodes University.

Justice Mpati brings to this office many assets – not least the acumen of a lawyer. It was the personal experience of injustice, and the observation of it, as inflicted on black people under apartheid, that led him into a legal career.

Although born in Durban, he is a son of the Eastern Cape, where he spent most of his youth, attending school first in Fort Beaufort, and then matriculating at Mary Waters High School in Grahamstown in 1967.

His experiences over the next eleven years or so did much to lead him into a legal career. There was the experience of injustice working as a petrol attendant in Grahamstown for three or four years. During this time he was arrested and charged with running an illegal taxi.

He decided not to pay either a fine or a lawyer, choosing to defend himself in court, cross-examining the policeman who had arrested him, exposing his lies, winning round the magistrate by speaking in Afrikaans, and securing a not guilty verdict. Here was a budding advocate.

Then he worked as a bar-person at what was then the Settlers' Motel, now the University's postgraduate village. There he spent time chatting to Rhodes students who frequented the bar. And he said to himself, if these students can spend so much time at the pub and still pass there exams, why can't I?

And so he enrolled at Rhodes for a BA in 1979, majoring in Legal Theory and isiXhosa, completing the degree under difficult circumstances – still working part-time at the pub for the first two years, and trying to maintain a family life with his wife, Mireille, and children in a two-roomed home on Victoria Road in Fingo Village. The BA degree was completed in the minimum three years, followed by the LL.B two years later.

So the foundations for this outstanding legal career were laid here at Rhodes University and in Grahamstown. It was in this town too that he did his articles with the firm Espin and Espin, registering as an attorney in 1985 – the only black attorney in the firm.

The second half of the 1980s was marked by escalating popular resistance to apartheid and by growing state repression. The newly qualified lawyer was drawn into these conflicts, representing victims of human rights violations across the Eastern Cape, in particular rendering his legal services in far-flung communities in the Karoo.

His human rights work continued on becoming an advocate in 1989 – the only black advocate among twenty or so in Grahamstown at the time – and then serving as the in-house counsel for the Grahamstown Legal Resources Centre, again taking on human rights cases, in particular representing victims of police brutality.

In 1996 came elevation to the bench, first as an acting judge, and the following year as a permanent judge of the Eastern Cape Division of the High Court. Then in 1999 came a call from Chief Justice Ismail Mohamed to act as a judge on the Supreme Court of Appeal – a position that became permanent the following year, making Justice Mpati the first black judge to take up a permanent appointment at the Supreme Court.

The rapid rise continued – to deputy President of the Supreme Court in 2003, and President in 2008, in between serving as an acting judge on the Constitutional Court in 2007.

One of Justice Mpati's long-standing outside interests has been rugby, having been involved as a player and administrator – captaining the Old Collegians club in Grahamstown and playing for the South Eastern Districts Rugby Union at provincial level, as well as serving as president of this union; then becoming involved during the apartheid years in the non-racial South African Rugby Union, being elected on to its national executive.

In the early 1990s he served on the national executive of the South African Rugby Football Union, and in 2003 he was appointed by the International Rugby Board as judicial officer for the rugby world cup in Australia.

There could hardly be a person better suited to be Rhodes University's new Chancellor than Justice Mpati. There has been his long involvement in the Grahamstown community – especially noteworthy his role as co-chair of the town's local government negotiating forum which met in the early 1990s to prepare for the introduction of democracy. And he is fluent in the three main languages of this town and region.

There is, too, a 33-year association with Rhodes University, going back to his student days in the early 1980s; serving as a member of the University Council from 1996 to 2008; being awarded an honorary doctorate by Rhodes at its centenary graduation in 2004 when distinguished old Rhodians were honoured; and acting as an external examiner for the Rhodes law department.

It has been said that his life story is worthy of a book – the rise from petrol attendant and bar-person has indeed been truly remarkable. His own working-class experience during apartheid made him ever more aware of the plight of the weak and defenceless, for whom he would work especially hard during his years as an attorney and advocate.

Most of all Justice Mpati has to be a superb role model and inspirational figure for any student, especially for those who have grown up in circumstances of deprivation. The message of his personal narrative is that with integrity, resilience, application, commitment and hard work it is possible to overcome and to succeed.

Join these qualities with a determination to pursue both legal and social justice, and we have the ingredients of the kind of leadership and citizenship that South Africa desperately needs today.

Justice Mpati has commented: “It feels as if my life has come full circle. When I arrived in Grahamstown as a young boy, I could never have imagined that one day I would be the Chancellor of the university I attended, and of which I am so proud.”

Justice Mpati, Sir, yours is a truly humbling and inspiring story, and we are proud and honoured to have you as the University’s seventh Chancellor in our 62-year history as an independent university, and in our 109-year history as a university.

As a humble man of intellect and integrity, you personify the Rhodes motto of *Strength, Virtue, Truth* and the Rhodes slogan *Where Leaders Learn*, and you are a superb role model for Rhodes students and staff.

We look forward to your tenure as Chancellor, to your, beginning this evening, presiding over the University graduation ceremonies, awarding degrees, diplomas and certificates to graduating students, to your gracing special University occasions and events and to your providing us with wise counsel as we continue to build this University in the service of knowledge and understanding, in the service of our people and our continent, and in the service of humanity.

Thank you.