

How to Spread It: Saleem Badat

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Saleem Badat

Dr Saleem Badat is the vice-chancellor of Rhodes University. He gives from his own pocket so that more young people can get a tertiary education.

In 1999, he was the first CEO of the Council on Higher Education, which advises the South African minister of education on higher education policy issues. His passion for education, particularly at tertiary level, was forged during a decade at the University of the Western Cape and he has built on that throughout his life.

With a plethora of degrees, as well as a certificate in higher education and science policy from Boston University, and honorary doctorates from the universities of the Free State and York, in England, he is also the recipient of a number of academic awards and fellowships, including the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship.

Also an author, his most recent work is *The Forgotten People: Political Banishment Under Apartheid* and he has worked hard to get the people featured in the book the support they deserve.

Q: As a committed educator, you have put your own money where your passion is – higher education – with the creation of the Jakes Gerwel Rhodes University Scholarship Fund, which is funded by a portion of your salary and sacrifice of benefits you are entitled to as vice-chancellor of Rhodes University. What inspired you to make this generous gesture?

A: Two things. One was the generous salary offered by Rhodes. While low compared with most other universities, it was more than adequate to sustain me and my family. I now had the wonderful opportunity to devote a portion of my salary and unnecessary benefits (like business-class air travel) to help open doors for others in the same way that, as a first-generation student from a modest family, local and international scholarships had opened doors for me.

The other reason was my concern about the way vice-chancellor salaries were escalating and the growing gap in relation to salaries of academics and support staff. I feared this could be very corrosive of a sense of community at universities.

It was my hope that my gesture could also be leveraged to promote giving by others – which is exactly what happened. The late Dr Margaret Nash, a well-known anti-apartheid fighter, was the first to contribute – R20 000; a retired Rhodes administrator pledged R10 000. The fund now stands at more than R2 million. Recently, Old Mutual pledged up to 15 full scholarships in memory of the late Jakes Gerwel.

Q: What are the selection criteria for this scholarship?

A: The scholarship is for financially needy students from the rural Eastern Cape who have the potential to succeed at Rhodes University. Among these might be another Jakes Gerwel, who goes on to make an outstanding contribution to our society.

Q: Who was the first recipient of this scholarship and where is that student now?

A: The first award was made to an amazing local woman, Sikelwa Julie Nxadi, for a BA degree. She is now in her second year. She came to our attention because of some columns she had penned in the Herald newspaper. We discovered that she had given up her job to become a secretary at Rhodes so that she could receive a fee rebate and study part time.

We offered her a Jakes Gerwel scholarship to study full time and she is thriving. As part of community engagement, she is actively involved in Upstart, a Grahamstown-based youth project for grades 8 to 10 learners from township schools who produce a newspaper, promote poetry and writing, and are involved in radio and TV journalism – all part of developing literacy among high school students and trying to facilitate their entry into Rhodes.

Julie temps in the VC's office whenever there is a need, so she keeps busy.

We want to keep track of people who receive Jakes Gerwel scholarships, to see how they progress in life and to celebrate their achievements.

Hopefully, they will be citizens who advance the public good and be philanthropic within the means available to them.

Q: You are also involved in efforts to improve schooling in disadvantaged schools in the Eastern Cape. How do you intervene?

A: Rhodes Community Engagement has numerous initiatives in Grahamstown preschools and schools. This is an uphill battle, as various factors make historically black schools dysfunctional. We are also working in Keiskammahoek and hope to extend this to select schools in other areas of rural Eastern Cape. Our education faculty works with teachers in rural areas and has a R21 million grant from Sishen Iron Ore Company Community Development Trust for work in Northern Cape schools, which is bearing fruit.

Q: In 1999 you were appointed as the first CEO of the Council on Higher Education, which advises the minister of higher education and training on policy issues. Did this job help you define how you'd make a difference?

Not really, it began much earlier. As a young student activist and later as editor of Grassroots community newspaper in Cape Town in the 1980s, I worked among students, youth, women and workers committed to building movements to destroy apartheid. In humble abodes and townships I learnt about human dignity and sharing, solidarity and community.

A: I then spent 10 years in the 1990s at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which was a life-changing experience. UWC provided an environment for me to blossom as a young black academic and policy researcher. Here also were talented and determined students from working class and rural poor backgrounds whose only handicap was lack of funds.

The needs are so great and there is only so much an individual can do. My passion is higher education. It can cultivate talented, socially committed and critical graduates who have the

knowledge and expertise to transform our society so that all can lead decent, rich and productive lives.

It can produce the knowledge that is essential for solving our problems. I am mindful of the fact that a bigger problem is all too often the lack of political courage and will.

Higher education can change the lives of not only individuals, but also families and whole communities. I have seen this.

So my giving is to financially needy university students. But it's a tough call when your partner tells you about this incredibly talented and determined young woman who needs to be supported at school.

Q: You are the author of many books, including *Black Man, You are on Your Own* and most recently *The Forgotten People: Political Banishment Under Apartheid*. In a way, the research and work put into such works is almost an act of philanthropy in itself. Would you agree?

A: Interesting thought! Certainly, there is no financial reward for scholars for the years spent researching and writing books. You do it to advance knowledge, to recover hidden histories and to promote understanding and wisdom.

Black Man, You are on Your Own was commissioned by the Biko Foundation. All fees and royalties were donated to the Biko Foundation. Royalties from *The Forgotten People* are being used to provide copies of the book to those directly affected by banishment.

I have written to the minister of justice, requesting him to ensure reparations and special pensions for the two living banished men, Anderson Ganyile from Bizana and Boy Seopa from GaMatlala in Limpopo, and special pensions for some of the spouses of banished people. I hope this happens. These people had their human rights violated under apartheid, which was confirmed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They deserve support.

Q: You were the recipient of an Inyathelo Exceptional Philanthropy Award in 2008. Do you think recognising philanthropists like yourself helps inspire others to follow suit?

A: I admire the work of Inyathelo in building a culture of giving and promoting know-how to mobilise funds for worthy causes.

I hope the annual Inyathelo Philanthropy Awards do inspire people to give. I doubt though that anyone that Inyathelo so generously honours gives to obtain recognition.

Q: Do you think South Africans are good at giving?

A: I think so. If you think of giving not just in terms of money. We have many amazing people who give so much of themselves to take care of others, support family, neighbours and those in need, and build a more caring, gentler and just society.

Some who have amassed great wealth also actively give to various causes. But given the huge personal wealth and income inequalities in South Africa and the level of poverty, there could be less crass materialism and conspicuous consumption, and more giving on the part of the wealthy.

It will be good to see more philanthropic foundations of the American kind, such as the Mellon, Ford, Carnegie and Kresge foundations. We have some, but there could be more.

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