

RHODES FUNDRAISER INPUT

7 November 2013

30 years ago a Natal University academic summoned a recent honours graduate to his office and advised the graduate that his future lay in a Master's degree at UCT. The academic indicated that he had contacted UCT and that a merit scholarship would be available for the Honours graduate.

The honours graduate was me, and the actions of my supervisor and the UCT scholarship were to fundamentally change my life. I flew in an aeroplane for the first time, when I made my way to UCT in 1981.

In the coming decade, the aspiration of Rhodes University is to continue to be an outstanding undergraduate university, and to become further renowned for excellence in postgraduate studies and research.

This year, we are already 30% postgraduate, with 2 300 postgraduates, including some 900 Honours students, 950 Master's students and 450 PhD students.

We will strive to maintain our reputation for having the best undergraduate pass and graduation rates, and for being constantly in the top three when it comes to postgraduate graduations rates, research outputs per capita academic staff member and having the most staff with doctoral degrees.

Yet, as we pursue our ambitions we will also be guided by our commitment to quality with equity and equity with quality, and the social obligation to ensure that the doors of Rhodes are open to all with talent; that no one is denied an opportunity for a Rhodes education simply because of financial circumstances.

Scholarships and bursaries and the opportunities to tutor and work part-time in the libraries at Natal and UCT were critical in enabling me to acquire a higher education and to let me succeed.

And in the years ahead, financial aid will be critical to support students with talent but in financial need to acquire a Rhodes undergraduate and postgraduate education.

In 2006, soon after I became Vice-Chancellor, I met in Alan Webb Hall a wonderful young man by the name of Siyabulela Nomoyi. I was attending a hall dinner and Siyabulela received mention for four distinctions in the June exams for his B.Sc degree.

I got to know Siyabulela over occasional teas in my office. He had attended Nathaniel Nyaluza High School in Grahamstown, the youngest child of a mother who worked as a domestic and a father who earned his living as a gardener; a first generation student and the only one in his family to proceed to university.

Siyabulela graduated with nine out of ten distinctions - majoring in maths, applied maths and statistics. He became a Mandela Rhodes Scholar 2009 and was then supported by Rhodes to win a scholarship at UCT to read for a Masters in Financial Mathematics.

He is currently a Quantitative Analyst at Taquanta Asset Managers in Cape Town. I hope that there will be an opportunity in the future for him to win a scholarship at Berkeley for a PHD.

He is currently involved in a community engagement initiative with some other graduates from Grahamstown to address the problem of education at his previous school.

In December 2006, I received a telephone call from a friend who organises fisher people on the Cape West Coast. Leneve Papier, the daughter of an unemployed fisherman and a mother who worked in a factory in Vredenburg had seemingly been rejected by the Cape universities despite having achieved 4 A's in matric.

Leneve, who had attended Vredenburg Hoerskool was given a grand send-off by her community to attend Rhodes on a full scholarship in February 2007. She registered for a B.Sc in Fisheries and Ichthyology and Botany.

Rhodes was a challenge for Leneve. She was working class, rural and Afrikaans-speaking. She could not understand why students spent so much time at the Rat and Parrot, when there were labs in which to do exciting research.

Leneve graduated in the minimum three years and gave the farewell speech at her Hall dinner. Today she is the Quality Assurance Manager at Sea Harvest. She has a standing invitation to return to Rhodes for an Honours degree on full scholarship.

Philip and Kathryn Abrahams, brother and sister, are local Grahamstown residents, whose mother was an educator at Victoria Girls and the sole income earner. Products of Graeme College and Victoria Girls respectively, neither would have been able to access a Rhodes education were it not for financial aid.

Outstanding students and thoroughly likeable and decent young people, Philip Abrahams on graduation was snapped up by Webber Wentzel and Edward Nathan Sonnenbergs.

He is now reading for a Masters of Corporate Law (MCL) at the University of Cambridge. Kathryn Abrahams is an associate at ENS and practices in insolvency, business rescue and debt recovery.

Vuyile Sixaba is a young man from Grahamstown, and attended Nathaniel Nyaluza High. The son of a single parent and gardener employed at Rhodes, Vuyile was one of the Eastern Cape's top matriculants in 2010.

Now in 2013, three years later, he will graduate with a BSC degree in Maths and Applied Maths, having seemingly got bored with Physics. We were hoping he would proceed to postgraduate studies in Astronomy and eventually make his way to the SKA. In all likelihood, he will graduate with 10 distinctions.

Finally, Lihle Mancoba came to Rhodes from West Bank High School, East London. She did not have the requisite points for direct admission, and so was registered for the four-year Extended Studies degree with scholarship support.

Last week we were informed that she has won a Mandela Rhodes Scholarship. Once again, despite having only 0.8% of South Africa's university students, we won 10% of all Mandela Rhodes scholarships - a little come down as we usually win almost 15%.

Lihle will next year read for a Masters in Politics through our new Alan Grey Centre for Leadership Ethics, which will be officially launched in Cape Town later this month.

Lihle says it is the Rhodes culture of learning that provided the scaffolding she needed to win the Mandela Rhodes scholarship. She adds that 'I can't imagine another institution where I could really branch out the way I have here'.

Ladies and gentlemen, the students I have mentioned come from varied social backgrounds – they are African, coloured and white South Africans, but have in common the intellect, potential, determination to succeed, and the need for financial support to succeed.

There are many other students at Rhodes like Lihle, Vuyile, Philip and Kathryn and Leneve and Siyabulela. Indeed, there are over 900 Lihle's and Vuyile's at undergraduate level and some 900 Leneve's and Philips at postgraduate level. 23% of students at Rhodes receive some or other kind of financial aid.

At the beginning of this year, we were confronted with 59 students that had received full financial aid for their undergraduate studies being eligible for Honours study – and without any financial aid. A major but nice challenge!

All were registered on the authority of the Vice-Chancellor, meaning that the VC has to stand surety for the 59 students. We eventually raised the money for these students. And we can anticipate that we will have to support a number of these students for Masters study. Another nice challenge!

Ladies and gentlemen, whatever we raise this evening and through other events and efforts is an investment in outstanding talented young men and women, and ultimately an investment in more prosperous, equitable and just South Africa and stable democracy.

We look forward to your support.