

Prof Martin Elgar West, Memorial
25 July 2015
Dr. Adam West

Good morning. On behalf of Martin's family, I would like to thank you for this wonderful turnout to honour Martin. Thank you to the speakers who have offered such kind tributes. And to the College of Music for the wonderful pieces, that my father would have so enjoyed. Thank you to Jessica and Bernard for the food that sustained him at so many official UCT engagements, and will do so for us again this afternoon. And thank you to Gerda and her team for facilitating this event. In particular, I would like to thank Jenny Boyes, for her unfailing support for our family during this time.

As a family, we are very touched by the outpouring of support and tributes that have been given to Martin. As has been said already, my father was a devoted servant of UCT and touched many people's lives in his professional capacity at UCT. And it is fitting that we hold his memorial here, at UCT, a place that has meant so much, to our family.

But we also remember him as the beloved head of our family. He was a profoundly gentle and considerate man, with a wicked sense of humour and an enormous appetite for life.

Despite the demands of his career, he was a constant presence in our lives. Never losing his sense of humour and perspective. Accepting, understanding, supporting and loving of us all.

Martin was born in Fish Hoek, in 1946, to Bill and Evelyn West. Bill, was the son of a hard-bitten Sargent Major and Deville Wood survivor Cecil West, a fitter-and-turner by trade. Bill had lost his

mother when he was very young and was raised by a fearsome group of aunts. After returning from active service in the 8th Army in North Africa during the 2nd world war, he became the first of the family to obtain higher education, putting himself through night-time B.Com classes at UCT. He distinguished himself with a class medal in Pure Mathematics II, and graduated in 1946.

And so begun a long history with the West Family and the University of Cape Town that continues today, almost 70 years later. Today, my family holds 19 degrees from this Institution.

Martin's mother, Evelyn, was the daughter of two primary school teachers. She was unable to complete her high schooling due to a near fatal bout of meningitis. She had shown promise as a writer, but had to settle for a shorthand typing course and became a typist. She too spent some years at UCT, being Departmental Secretary for the Department of English and finally Executive Secretary to one of the then DVCs, Professor Jack de Wet.

Up to the age of 12, my father led an uncomplicated existence in Fish Hoek, to where he and my mother retired, some 50 years later. However, at the age of 12, he was uprooted, by maternal edict, and sent as a weekly boarder to Bishops in order to improve his education. This was to prove a formative experience for my father, although perhaps not in the way his mother had intended.

I quote here from his unfinished memoir, "One West, One Bullet":

"[Bishops] was a regimented world ruled by bells, and indiscriminate beatings for even minor infractions of the rules. A world of cold showers and lean rations. I did not like it one bit, and wept every Sunday when I had to go back.

The main lesson I learned [at Bishops] was of privilege, and, though I didn't know it then, of [social] class.

The first question I had, was from a roommate, who asked me casually how many acres my parents had. I mumbled that I didn't know. In reality they had no acres, lived in rented accommodation

and didn't have a car.

I think most of the boys accepted wealth as a natural state, and didn't think about it. [However,] I cared about it, and although everyone was perfectly pleasant to me throughout my school career, I made no real friends and always felt the outsider.

This experience gave me some insight into the feelings and experiences of poor Black students who came into a more alien environment in the residences of the University of Cape Town”

Martin continued to finish his schooling at Bishops. These were to be lonely years, cut off from his family through the lengthy commute on public transport to and from Bishops. He graduated in 1963. Of himself at that time he said:

“I was 17 1/2 years old, with no plans or ambitions. If pushed, I would say that I might like to be a journalist, with teaching as a backstop. I enrolled with no great enthusiasm as a BA student at the University of Cape Town in 1964.

I was to leave it 43 years later, once again with no plans or ambitions but with a sense of satisfaction and a feeling of gratitude towards an institution to which I have devoted most of my life, and which has given me so much in return.”

I would like to highlight just two momentous years from his early years at UCT.

In 1969 he acquired his MA with distinction, published as “A Divided Community”. He also acquired a PhD project topic, a generous source of research funding and a wife! All of these being entirely unknown to him at the beginning of the year!

My father met my mother, then Valerie Voigt, in February 1969. She had completed a BA and higher diploma in Librarianship at UCT, and was working as a librarian in the city. Suffering again under maternal

edict, this time from Val's mother, they were married in October that year!

This was a wonderful marriage that lasted almost 46 years, produced 2 children, and 4 grandchildren, and truly embodied the pledge of "*in sickness and in health*". My mother remains deeply grateful for their shared UCT life. For the experiences and people that she met through their joint association with this institution. And, I know that my father would want me to acknowledge her for the support, companionship and diversity of interest and opinion that she gave him.

Upon becoming married, my father and mother moved to Hillbrow where Martin started two years of work in Soweto, which culminated in his PhD, published as "Bishops and Prophets".

During those two years, he formed warm and trusting relationships with many leaders of the Independent Churches, and towards the end of his time there was asked to become an honorary Bishop of one of the Churches, an offer which he gently declined, despite the fact that my mother liked the thought of being "*Bishopikazi*".

Another momentous year was in 1972, when my father had the "full catastrophe", as he described his descent into respectability: He had a Ph.D., a full-time permanent job as a lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology, was mortgaged to the hilt on a house, and he learned that my mother was expecting their first child! My sister Paula.

And thus began his career at UCT, a career which absorbed, interested and challenged him, and which he pursued with an enduring love for UCT and the certainty of the privilege of working here.

But what of Martin the private man?

Martin was rooted in his family and immensely proud of, and supportive of, my sister Paula and myself. For us, UCT was a part of our family. From formal dinners at our home, USHEPIA braais, the

informal staff band *Ad Hoc Promotion*, afternoons in the Anthropology tearoom and later Bremner, staff cricket matches and rounds of golf with colleagues, UCT was a central part of our upbringing, of which we have only fond memories.

Aside from his family, my father had two enduring passions: Sport and music.

Despite modest ability, Martin loved sport, and was an enthusiastic member of the UCT staff cricket team for many years. This was a truly extraordinary team, with members spanning staff of all ranks from janitors, all the way down to the Vice Chancellor! (the then Sir Richard Luyt), who insisted on weekly practices in the UCT nets at 4:15pm on Thursdays, a somewhat inconvenient time, but no one argued with Sir Richard!

Other stalwarts included Dave Reid, Sandy Perez, Koos Williams, JM Coetzee, the van der Bijl brothers, Moses Blaauw (Julian Cooke, Eugene Moll, Chris Harris, John Bolton) and many, many others.

As Dave Reid wrote recently in a tribute to Martin:

“We probably spent more time together on cricket fields than on campus, but it was amazing just how broad a spectrum of UCT people were connected via that pastime, and highlighted just how Martin valued social interaction as an integral part of the collegiate experience.”

On one glorious occasion, Martin, a left arm spin bowler of questionable ability, produced a hat trick, to the incredulous hilarity of his teammates. Invited to repeat the feat of hitting the stumps 3 times in a row in the practice nets, by Sir Richard Luyt, Martin was unsurprisingly, and to general amusement, unable to do so.

Martin’s wicked sense of humour also took cricket with him to tedious faculty board meetings on occasion. He created **Academic Cricket**, and was amazed when it didn’t catch on. Again, I quote

from “One West, One Bullet”:

“Scoring in Academic cricket is based on a list of words or phrases agreed to in advance which score runs, every time they are uttered in the meeting. Thus the words "subcommittee" or "principle" could be designated as 6s, "chair" and "faculty" could be 4s, "object" a 3, "dean" a single and so on. A wicket falls when a faculty bore, again from an agreed list, rises to speak.

So a speech beginning "I must object to the subcommittee on principle, Mr Chair" would score 19 runs. I played my finest game against Professor David Welsh in a Faculty of Arts Board meeting when I ran up a record 83 runs, and David was bowled by the Professor of Sociology for naught.”

Then Andrew Prior introduced Martin to the dubious pleasures of golf and Martin and Andy Duncan, Sandy Perez and others started a peripatetic golf game at different clubs every weekend, until the costs of petrol exceeded the fees and they joined a club in Cape Town. In later years, he was a keen participant in Ron’s Mug and Kate’s Jug, the annual staff golfing competition, loosely styled on the US Masters, with the coveted prize of the “Vile Green Jacket”.

After retirement, and when Parkinson's made golf impossible, Martin joined the Fish Hoek Croquet club where he was warmly received. He described his first experience of Fish Hoek croquet as follows:

*“To my distress they play an effete form far removed from the cut-throat game of my youth, where the opportunity to dispatch your opponents into the flower-beds at the other end of the garden was my preferred strategy. Though I have not held a mallet for over 30 years, I find my hand has not entirely lost its cunning, and there is enough **spite** left in what they now play to make it enjoyable...”*

Martin greatly enjoyed the croquet and the friendship of the club members. And was enormously pleased to be known there primarily as Bill West’s son. He inaugurated the first "Martin's moonlight

madness" event, when play and a braai took place under the full summer moon.

Martin loved music and was an enthusiastic amateur pianist, something he inherited from his father. He played at home all the time. Popular and show tunes, children's songs, hymns and jazz standards. As young children, he played us to sleep after story time and filled the house with music.

He loved the College of Music and after moving to Linkoping House attended student concerts regularly. He was immensely proud of the extraordinary success of the many talented musicians the College produced, some of whom we have heard from today.

My father was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in 2006, which precipitated his early retirement. He endured the progression of this terrible affliction stoically and with humour. It is by **far** the most impressive thing I ever saw him do.

We are all profoundly grateful to the wonderful home nurses, who cared for him in the last year and enabled him to die in peace, and with dignity, in the comfort of his own home, surrounded by family.

Despite its debilitating effects, that robbed him of seeing his grandchildren grow up, and them of better knowing this wonderful man, he **never** complained. In fact, it was characteristic of him to always ask of how **WE** were managing. This was true up to the last days of his life.

We miss him greatly and remember his sense of humour, courage and love with enormous pride.

As has been said, my father was fond of an, **often humorous, anecdote** to make his point. Allow me to end with one in his memory.

My father shared his birthday with Nelson Mandela. I like to think they also shared a remarkable human touch, and a little spark of humour, so needed on occasion.

I was lucky enough to shake Nelson Mandela's hand twice, both on the same afternoon. It was 1996. I was an undergraduate student at UCT and was leaving campus late one afternoon, and as I crossed between Smuts and Fuller Hall, I saw a few large black BMWs and a small line of students milling about outside, one of whom was a friend of mine. "Nelson Mandela is inside!" she said excitedly. I quickly joined the line and waited.

Shortly, out came Nelson Mandela followed by an entourage, including, to my surprise, my father. Madiba had paid a surprise visit to UCT to examine the quality of the accommodation for Gracel Machel's daughter, Josina, who was going to be staying in residence next year.

Madiba came out, looked around and saw this tiny group of excited students standing there, and to the dismay of his security, strode straight over to greet us. He went down the line, shaking each of our hands warmly. He shook my hand and then moved on to the next person in the line.

My father right behind him, suddenly recognized me and immediately said: "Oh Mr President, this is my son." Madiba immediately turned back, took my hand and with a twinkle in his eye said: "*Young man, you made a very good choice for a father!*"

Mr President, I couldn't agree with you more.

[end]