



# Alan Jay Pifer: A personal reflection by Stuart Saunders

People from all walks of life were fond of Alan Pifer. He was a man of great integrity who listened more than he spoke and helped others whenever he could.



Photographs of Alan Pifer courtesy of Carnegie Corporation of New York

**He was helpful to me at different times during my term as vice-chancellor and it was a great privilege to gain his friendship and to grow close during that time and afterwards, when we had both retired.**

We first met at Glenara (the official residence of the vice-chancellor of UCT) in 1980. I was the vice-chancellor elect and Alan was president of the Carnegie Corporation. In his quiet and thoughtful way, Alan asked what I hoped to achieve during my term in office. I replied that I wanted the majority of the students to be black when I retired. Shortly



afterwards, Alan arranged for me to visit the USA to study academic development programmes, which did not exist in South Africa at that time. I soon realised that Alan was driven by a sense of fairness that committed him to racial justice and to making higher education available to all.



*Emeritus Professor Stuart Saunders, vice-chancellor of UCT, 1981 to 1996*

and under his stewardship the fund performed well: by 1996, \$17 million had been raised. This was unexpected, as it came at a time when many Americans were opposed to funding projects in apartheid South Africa. Over time, exceptions were made for liberal institutions such as UCT, who were actively advancing opportunities for black South Africans in tertiary education.

Most of the funds raised were for the financial support of black students at UCT and for the ADP. There was also support for additional accommodation for black students. In time, Alan Pifer was responsible for providing financial aid to black students at the universities of Rhodes, Witwatersrand, Natal and Western Cape.

The Alan Pifer Research Fund was created by his friends at the UCT Fund of New York, Edna and Caryl Haskins, to honour his achievements. The prize is awarded annually by the UCT vice-chancellor in recognition of outstanding welfare-related research. It highlights the strategic good of promoting socially responsive research and is given to a UCT researcher

whose outreach work has contributed to the advancement and welfare of disadvantaged South African people.

After Alan had retired from Carnegie and then from the UCT Fund in 1992, he remained active, serving on the boards of several non-governmental organisations.

Alan provided the impetus to promote the comprehensive study of black poverty in South Africa, which culminated in a conference at UCT chaired by Francis Wilson. It was through Alan's presidency of the Carnegie Corporation that the study could be supported, along with the Centre for Conflict Resolution.

Alan did not seek the limelight but he was not daunted by public scrutiny or high office. Sure of his values, he was consistent in wanting to bring about changes that would benefit the disadvantaged and he did not hesitate to use his considerable influence to that end. Because of him, other foundations and multinational corporations started making positive contributions to South Africa.

The following extract from Alan's writing was quoted in the citation when UCT conferred an honorary doctorate on him. It is a description of South Africa as "a microcosm of the world-wide problem of how peoples of different cultures are to live peacefully together. South Africa, in fact, presents as great a challenge on that score as exists anywhere, making what happens here a matter of wide international significance and concern."

Alan Pifer died in 2005 at the age of 84, but I cannot imagine an end to the good he established, as it is passed down from one generation of students to the next.