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UCT pays tribute to the late VC Stuart Saunders

WATCH: [Video tribute by Professor Phakeng.](#)

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VIEW: [Photo essay honouring Emeritus Professor Saunders.](#)

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has paid tribute to former Vice-Chancellor, Emeritus Professor Stuart Saunders, who died peacefully in his sleep on 12 February 2021 after a short illness.

In light of these sad news, the UCT flag has been flying at half-mast since the morning of Friday, 12 February. Saunders served the university exceptionally for a remarkable 16 years as vice-chancellor (from 1981 until 1996).

UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng expressed sadness at Saunders' passing, recalling how he led the institution through a difficult period.

Saunders was at the helm, for the most part, during the darkest days of apartheid. During that period, he played a leading role in driving the university's policy to provide education of international excellence and to be a leading research university.

"It was under his venerated leadership that UCT's residences were opened to students of all races. This move not only challenged the status quo during a time of segregation, but it also created the space for intellectual debates in an intolerant society. He is also regarded as being among those who played a role in putting an end to the racially segregated training of medical registrars. He will further, always be remembered for initiating fundraising efforts among South African universities to ensure their academic freedom," said Phakeng.

In 2002 Saunders was awarded The Order of the Baobab, a national honour for South Africans for distinguished service to their country, for his immense and immeasurable contribution to higher education.

"A physician by training, his cutting-edge medical research was recognised by no less than seven local and international universities conferring honorary degrees on him. In addition to UCT, he was honoured by the universities of Aberdeen, Sheffield, Rhodes, Princeton, Toronto and Wits," said Phakeng.

Saunders graduated with an MBChB degree at UCT in 1953. He did further studies at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in the UK and at Harvard University in the US, before returning to UCT to complete a Doctor of Medicine degree in 1965.

A former professor of medicine at UCT, he has remained an active part of the UCT family in various ways. The most recent is through the Dr Stuart John Saunders Lecture, held in his honour annually for the past two years.

In the early 1990s, he established the UCT Trust in the United Kingdom. Post his time as vice-chancellor – and in illustrating his unwavering commitment to the institution – he served as board member for the trust. Regarded as one of the university's most committed and called-upon supporters, Saunders also served as president of the UCT Heritage Society.

He authored a book titled Vice-Chancellor on a Tightrope: A personal account of climactic years in South Africa. The book title is a reference to the balancing act he had to perform while leading the institution through those turbulent and tumultuous years in the country.

"Saunders certainly navigated UCT through those stormy years, and as a result even in the many years following his tenure, the university remained on the right footing. His contribution to the institution, the medical field, the higher education sector and to society at large will always bear testimony of the great man he was," Phakeng concluded.

UCT conveys heartfelt condolences to his children, Jane and John, the entire Saunders family and to those who knew or worked with him.

The UCT Communication and Marketing Department has created a dedicated feature page reflecting on and celebrating Saunders' life. The page pays tribute to Saunders through articles, videos and pictures.

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