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Former UCT student activists laud late Saunders as ‘equality champion’ during dark days of apartheid

The University of Cape Town (UCT) hosted an online memorial service for former Vice-Chancellor Dr Stuart Saunders on 24 February. Dr Saunders was a dedicated servant, steward and supporter of UCT. He passed away on Friday morning, 12 February 2021.

Speakers during the memorial represented the calibre and diversity of those who had tuned in to pay tribute and who have shared their tributes since his passing on 12 February: Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, UCT’s Chair and Head of the Department of Medicine Professor Ntobeko Ntusi, Head of the National Prosecuting Authority’s investigating directorate Advocate Hermoine Cronje, co-founder of Manumit Corporation Thulani Khanyile, Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, political activist Mary Burton, Emeritus Professor Solomon Benatar and Chair of the UCT Council Babalwa Ngonyama.

Bridge builder

Two former students who were at UCT during Saunders’ tenure as vice-chancellor shared their memories of his leadership during the dark days of apartheid. Khanyile and Advocate Cronje were student leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s, during a period of “escalating and sustained resistance to apartheid”.

In her tribute, Cronje recalled how, following a workers’ strike in 1991 and subsequent solidarity by, particularly, black students, she had witnessed Saunders’ “genuine acknowledgement” of how complicated and complex it was to be a student of colour at the university. She added that Saunders “represented a time and place in UCT’s history that she is proud to be associated with” and that he was “the bridge builder”.

Khanyile said that there were many lessons to be learnt from Saunders’ leadership.

“Our hope is that current leaders of UCT, students and staff may learn from the consequential example of Dr Saunders and his team, to listen deeply to one another and other key stakeholders in the university and the country to renew and take the university to new heights and embed further UCT amongst all our people.”

Another UCT graduate paying tribute was the Most Reverend Dr Makgoba who served on the Bishop Webb Trust alongside Saunders. He said that during a recent meeting, it was “strange and painful” to not have Saunders there, motivating for financial support for postgraduate students at resource-poor universities.

The Anglican archbishop, who paid tribute on behalf of the church, the Western Cape Religious Leaders Forum and the broader faith community, added that as someone who needed ministerial exemption to study at university, Saunders' efforts to enrol black students was enormously important.

ENDS

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