

THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN & SOCIAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF VENDA

Memorial Service For Prof. D.G. Thabede (January 29th, 2014)

'My Dear Brother, Dumisani, Good Bye'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND WELCOMES

Thank you Mr Program Director, the management of the University of Venda, the Dean of the School of Human & Social Sciences (Prof. Makgopa), the Thabede Family representatives, as well as representatives of all campus structures and all other organizations present today, students, staff, our visitors who came to be with the Department of Social Work, the School of Human and Social Sciences and the Univen at large in this moment of great sorrow. To all of you, your presence is highly appreciated and truly makes us feel that at least we are not alone, at least today. Tomorrow is another day and is unpredictable. Thank you very much for your presence, expressions of solidarity and participation in this memorial service and the forthcoming funeral of our beloved Head of the Department of Social Work and vice-dean of the School of Human & Social Sciences: Prof. Dumisani Gaylord Thabede. Everyone referred to him simply by the first name: Dumisani. When he and fellow students were in celebratory or revolutionary mood, they would refer to each other as 'Taliban'.

RECEIVING THE MESSAGE

Last Sunday (January 19th, 2014), a very hot summer's day in Bloemfontein, my phone rang at about 14.00 with totally unexpected and unwelcomed news. My life changed forever. The person on the phone, in a panicky mode asked me where Dumisani was and that perhaps I should call him, as there is a fear that something has happened. My initial thoughts was about car accident, as the previous week when we spoke were shared our 2 different car-related accidents experiences. After making numerous calls all over the place, I only managed to establish the facts just before 16.00.

The information I have states that Dumisani was working normally during the whole week until Friday, supposedly left the office after 7pm on that day (January 17th, 2014). He supposedly drove to Polokwane on the Saturday. He took ill during the same Saturday night and was taken to the doctor, then transferred to a hospital. He reported passed away Sunday morning at about 5am (January 19th, 2014).

Like all of us, he would from time to time say to me 'pain this and that', but on the surface he was a picture of normal health. He never complained loudly about ill-health. As someone close, we frequently spoke about an appointment with a medical specialist. When I last spoke to him on Thursday (January 16th, 2014), he reminded me about that appointment, as well as that we would meet in Polokwane and then be on our way together to Thohoyandou. Sadly he never made either of the appointments.

People ask me difficult questions, as they knew we were very close. 'How do you feel?' 'Are you coping?' At this moment my thoughts are with the family and our students. For me his passing is akin to the unexpected fall of the tallest and most fruitful tree in the African rain-forest. Who will provide the shade, fruits and be the compass for direction? This year, 2014, I have known Dumisani for 33 years. I am at a loss, am devastated. Speaking on behalf of the department, I know our students and colleagues feel the same way. Personally he was a friend, my elder brother, confidant, my motivator. He never failed all the time to keep saying to me: '*Hei, you are my brother*'. I knew what he meant. He was the only child, with both parents late. Again, light-heartedly - here on campus for a while - people would just simply say '*Dumisani's friend*' when referring to me. I wonder what is going to be my next name.

THE DEPARTMENTAL, SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY ROLES BY PROF. THABEDE

As all of us will hear and read on the obituary, Prof. Thabede over the last 25 years that he has been associated with this university, has played various roles in this community. He has been the HOD for Social Work HOD for 22 years; and seen it all here at Univen.

Some of the biggest challenges over the years that he and the department were confronted with included:

The last 6, 7 years have been on the nightmarish side. Staff shortage, large classes leading to work overload, inadequate infrastructure, curriculum development and accreditation challenges with our professional bodies (SA Council for Social Service Professions and Council for Higher Education). Often Prof. Thabede expressed a fear that we should do everything to ensure that BSW program should never collapse.

To meet some of these challenges, additional staff was hired and we are expecting some more. Under his leadership and support of Prof. Makgopa (the dean) and DVC Academic's Office, the department managed to ensure that all program audit processes were completed by 2013. We are just awaiting formal reports. Often when we reflected we spoke of 2014 onwards being where we needed to put additional touches here and there. We thought that the big storm was largely over. The future looked bright.

WHO IS PROF. THABEDE?

Dumisani enduring trait was that he was always uniquely 'himself', never a conventionalist, a free thinker and spirit. Most of the time during the 33 years that I have known Dumisani as various stages of life, he was a picture of good health. He turned 60 years this past month (born: December 13th, 1953). He had a very good physical constitution, because if he were to say he was 45 /50 years or so, most people would not argue with that.

During the 2000's together with Dr. Mogorosi, Dr. Mudau and Adv. Sikhitha (Social Work), Prof. Amey (Statistics) and Prof. Oni (Agricultural Economics), in various combinations formed the University of Venda Research Team which conducted commissioned studies. These studies included *"The Socio-Economic Survey of Households in the Districts of the Limpopo Province"*; *"Audit of Poverty Alleviation, NGO's and Crèches in Vhembe and Mopani Districts in the Limpopo Province"* for Limpopo Social Development and *"The Survey on Vulnerable Children in Malamulele Villages of Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province"* for the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund.

He was deeply knowledgeable about Afrocentricism, Philosophy and social research. Often when we met after school breaks, he would be talking about this or that book he bought. His academic areas of interest were Social Research Methodology, Clinical Social Work, Mental Health, HIV/AIDS, Multicultural Social Work and Social Welfare Policy. Among his

writing, include his doctoral dissertation *“Casework: An Afrocentric Perspective”* (2005), *‘The African Worldview as the Basis of Practice in the Helping Professions’* (Social Work /Maatskaplike Werk journal (2008) and *“Economic Impact of HIV/AIDS on Rural Households, Small Holder Agricultural Production and Orphans in Northern Province”* (Obi, Okorie, Thabede, Oni and Jordaan, South African Journal of Economics).

At some stage he served in the executives of ASAUV here at Univen, Association of SA Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) and the Limpopo Provincial Welfare Forum at the advent of democracy.

He was curriculum co-designer and facilitator; Masupa-Tsela Youth Pioneers (for the National Social Development) aimed at training youth, nation-wide, on community activism. This was a collaborative venture of the South African and Cuban Governments. To enrich Masupa-Tsela, he was observational study delegate that visited the University of Habana, Cuba (2008).

He was keenly interested in the quality of education of the Black /African child. His soul, essence and philosophy of life were centred on *‘solidarity’* and *‘being there’*. Social work students really loved and looked up to him. His office was always attending to individual staff and students matters. Besides philosophy (African-), national politics, staff association issues, photography, he loved the arts (sculptures) and everything electronic. He was a life-time Buccaneer.

If he had a fault and weakness, it was that he trusted and really went out of his way for most people in need – at his own cost. He really believed in the potential of everyone to *‘do the right thing’*, once entrusted with a task. He himself frequently spoke about that to me, when the same people betrayed that trust and his help.

He really abhorred betrayal, expediency, laziness and refusal to think on anyone’s part. He constantly urged students to learn to be good to themselves and each other. We would not finish a discussion on work-related issues without him saying: *‘let’s ensure that we take principled decisions’*.

'As You Remember My Matter'

The Bible talks about the truth setting us free. Again, the French philosopher Voltaire said: *'To the living we owe respect, to the dead the truth'*. I am trying my best to keep to both. Truth be told, Prof. Thabede had a very rough ride here at the university during 2008-2011. He was deeply hurt, I know. I have known him for 33 years. Most of the time when he talked to me about his infamous disciplinary case here at the university, he would always start by saying: *'As you remember my matter'*.

The things that riled him the most included being accused of sexual harassment, the ensuing grossly inaccurate and offensive *Sowetan* headlines ('sex pest professor') about 2009, as well as lack of support from the university when he thought he, the department with the support of Prof. Ngobeli (the dean then) tried to ensure that standards and order were maintained for the sake of the quality and credibility of the BSW program. He, Prof. Ngobeli, Dr. Mudau and I found ourselves in hitherto uncharted waters trying to sort out departmental challenges. What was painful was that he ended being charged alone. It took him a soul-destroying 2/3 years to clear his name. He still planned to clear his name. What seemed to consume him the most were about how could he be involved in 'abuse' and 'violation of human rights' (sexual harassment) and be charged for such, when we were teaching and training our students about the very same things?

Recently towards the end of the year he called me to his office, saying again: *'As you remember my matter'*. He said something that really send a very cold shiver down my spine. The look was very serious and bordering on pain. In summary, he said he had just seen a report that includes at least 2 shocking allegations about him. His name is being referred to in this 'secret environmental analysis report', stating that

- a) the reason why he managed to eventually not be found guilty in his case included that someone here at the university gave him 'illegal help' with his charges and
- b) that he was part of some cabal at the university.

He was very shocked about again being set up for the next round of false accusations. With a pain in the voice said he never received tainted help from anybody, that he won his case

fairly through documented evidence and the testimony by the dean and staff members. He kept saying and asking me, do I think he is capable of plotting and betraying anyone here at the university? Suffice is to say, I was as shocked as he was.

UNIVERSITY OF VENDA COMMUNITY (STUDENTS AND STAFF)

After a cataclysmic loss of Prof. Thabede, the question that comes is: *'What do we do now?'* If I had it my way, the building block housing the Department of Social Work (C block) would be renamed *'Prof. D.G. Thabede Building'*. The man gave his life to Univen, 25 years; 22 of which he was the HOD for Social Work and at various times deputy-dean of the School of Human & Social Sciences! I strongly do believe that in the memory of the great soul that we are all about to bury that:

1. We must keep him in our collective memory. In the same vein as in the words of Maya Angelou's poem, *"Nelson Mandela: His day is Done"* on the recent occasion of the passing of the great Nelson Mandela:

We will not forget you, we will not dishonor you, we will remember and be glad that you lived among us, that you taught us, and that you loved us all.

2. Everyone, especially to staff, our past and current students, must just keep doing their best in all endeavors. Like the message from Galatians 6 say:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those we belong to the family of believers

3. Whatever we do, we must always remember those who sacrificed for our freedom and always honor them. To paraphrase President Thabo Mbeki's *"I am an African"*, that we are

the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphophu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom

4. In Dumisani's honour we need to resolve to be strong. In the words of the poem, 'Invictus' by William Earnest Henley:

Beyond this place of wrath and tears

Looms but the Horror of the shade,

And yet the menace of the years

Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,

How charged with punishments the scroll.

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul.

Prof. Thabede has passed the baton on, to the next generation. It is up to this next generation to decide what it does.

On behalf of the Department of Social Work at the University of Venda, thank you for being there with the family and us during these difficult times.

To quote Maya Angelou again, I hope this will also be true for us:

'No sun outlasts its sunset, but it will rise again and bring the dawn.'

Lala ngo xolo Dumisani. May your soul rest in peace.

My dear brother, Dumisani, good bye.

I am Lobelo D. Mogorosi (Dr.)

Department of Social Work

University of Venda

January 25th, 2014

Dumisani Goodbye Univen2014 Social Work