

Judge Lex Mpati

In the words of our previous Vice-Chancellor, Dr Saleem Badat upon the appointment of Judge Lex Mpati as the new chancellor of Rhodes University in 2013: "Judge Lex Mpati personifies the values we embrace at Rhodes University of rising above self, of humility, commitment, excellence and ethical behaviour. His is an inspiring story and we are honoured to have him as our chancellor."

From petrol attendant and bartender at the Settlers Inn Motel, to President of the Supreme Court of Appeal and Chancellor of Rhodes University, his story is indeed remarkable.

He was born in Durban, but his maternal grandparents were from Fort Beaufort. He attended St Joseph's Catholic School, Fort Beaufort and then matriculated in 1967 from Mary Waters High School, Grahamstown.

When time allowed he used to sit in on court cases, listening to charges and agonising over the way people went to jail through lack of proper defence. His dream of studying law started when he was arrested for illegally operating his grandfather's car as a taxi at the Grahamstown railway station in 1968. He was given the option to pay a fine or go to court. He chose the latter and decided to defend himself, coming up with a suitable defence and was found Not Guilty.

As a keen rugby player he became a founding member of the South Eastern Districts Rugby Union made up of clubs from Grahamstown and surrounds and affiliated with the non-racial South African Rugby Union. In the mid-70s SEDRU decided to make a statement by organizing a multi-racial rugby game. They approached Rhodes Rugby Club and requested 7 players from their first team be made available to play in the game. This was gladly agreed and despite road-blocks and heavy police presence the players were 'smuggled' in and the match was played before a capacity crowd at Dan Qeqe Stadium in Veeplaas.

Judge Mpati finally managed to enrol at Rhodes under the special permit required by black students and began his law degree in 1979, paying for his first year fees with his bartender earnings. In second and third year he received a scholarship, which covered his studies and some of his books. He completed his BA degree 1982, followed by an LLB in 1984, becoming only the second black Rhodes' LLB graduate. In Rhodes 2004 Centenary year, he was bestowed with a Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*).

As an advocate he worked on his own from his chambers in Grahamstown until 1993, when he became in-house counsel at the Legal Resources Centre. He was invited to the Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein and was permanently appointed in 2000. In 2003 he became deputy president and then president in 2008 - the first Rhodes' Law *alumnus* to hold this position. He has also been an Acting Judge in Constitutional Court and was the first black Supreme Court Judge.

This is but a brief synopsis of a wonderful career and again in the words of Dr Badat "A humble man of great intellect and wonderful integrity, who personifies the Rhodes' motto of Strength, Virtue, Truth and the Rhodes' slogan 'Where Leaders Learn', Judge Mpati is a superb role model for Rhodes' students". He is most deserving of the Distinguished Old Rhodian Award.