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Three former UCT VCs pay tribute to the late Saunders

READ: Full tribute by Dr Max Price.	READ: Full tribute by Dr Mamphela Ramphele.	READ: Full tribute by Professor Njabulo Ndebele.
VIEW: Photo essay honouring Dr Saunders.	WATCH: Memorial service at 19:00 on 24 February.	WATCH: Tribute by Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng.

A mentor who imparted wisdom and offered guidance. A courageous leader who opened doors for many. A man who laid firm grounds for the University of Cape Town (UCT) of today.

This is how three former UCT vice-chancellors – Dr Max Price, Professor Njabulo Ndebele and Dr Mamphela Ramphele – remembered Dr Stuart Saunders, who died peacefully on 12 February 2021 after a short illness. Saunders led the university as vice-chancellor from 1981 until 1996.

Price, who was at the helm until 2018, said: "Since 2008, when I took up the position of VC at UCT, I spent many hours with Stuart: attending functions and meetings at or on behalf of UCT, and discussing and comparing experiences as vice-chancellors. What stands out above all, throughout these years, is Stuart's love of, and commitment to, his alma mater and the university he shepherded through some difficult times.

"Stuart's standing and contribution was well known and much admired. It earned him the respect of many of his peers and older alumni who had known him as VC, so much so that I knew having him accompany me to alumni events around the world would double the attendance, not to mention boost the donations. He gave his time and energy to supporting the Convocation as its president for several years, and as the founding president of the Heritage Society (whose members are people who have written UCT into their wills)."

Price said UCT "can count itself very privileged to have had Stuart Saunders dedicate his life to the institution."

Price's predecessor, Ndebele – whose term was from 2000-2018 – remembered Saunders' many qualities.

"At the core of Stuart Saunders as vice-chancellor and as a human being – the one as an institutional leader, the other as a person – were the sources of his gravitas: genuineness, believability, integrity and the calm intelligence of an intellect that was as discerning as it gave conviction and warmth to his personality. It is these outstanding qualities that must have given him the conviction and courage to break down barriers set up by hostile state officialdom.

"The same qualities were the sources of his deep respect for the talented downtrodden wasted in their millions by racist stupidities that got structured into state governance systems and laws: the brutal waste of human beings. He would get the talented downtrodden in their numbers into one of the great South African universities of the world. That's what got Stuart Saunders to go out of his way, tirelessly," he said.

Ndebele said Saunders laid firm grounds for the UCT of today and will be remembered and honoured by generations of future South Africans.

Ramphele, who led UCT from 1997 to 2000, expressed her "deepest gratitude to Stuart Saunders for the courageous leadership he provided to UCT at a time of great risk and uncertainty for a country struggling to shed its racist legacy and embrace the opportunity of inclusion."

She said: "I am one of the beneficiaries of Stuart Saunders' visionary leadership, which enabled me to not only enter academic life in my mature years, but to rise to becoming his successor as vice-chancellor of UCT. His ability to transcend the boundaries of his upbringing and to embrace the truism that there can be no excellence without equity, at a time when racist and sexist views were widespread in our society, placed him ahead of his peers and set UCT above the rest."

Saunders has left an indelible, deep footprint on the institutional framework of UCT, said Ramphele.

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