

## **In Memoriam – Prof. Bongani Mayosi**

**By Siphon M Pityana**

**Chairperson - UCT Council**

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Programme Director, our host hon Premier Zille, hon Minister Aaron Motsoaledi and other Ministers here present. Distinguished guests, community of UCT and Groote Schuur Hospital where the late Professor Bongani Mayosi worked. Ladies and gentlemen.

To Bongani's family – Prof Nonhlanhla Khumalo, Bongani's beloved wife, Nosipho, Vuyi and Gugu, his precious daughters. Mama, siblings and the Khumalo family, please know that our thoughts, prayers and deepest and most heartfelt condolences are with you.

Like many, I have spent the past days trying to make sense of this tragedy. I've woken in the middle of the night, trying desperately to grapple with the fact that one of our most gifted and beloved clinicians is no longer with us. One of the nation's great endowments has been lost in my trusteeship as the Chairperson of the Council of UCT.

I feel burdened by an overwhelming sense of accountability. Not even the fact of the realisation that he had a life beyond UCT is sufficient solace or hideout. The search for answers to questions for the part we, as an institution, may have played in this, are never ending.

You need only have picked up a newspaper, turned on the radio or looked at social media over the past week to understand just how painfully his passing is felt, and how many lives Bongani touched over his extraordinary life. It has been striking that, for one of the most storied medical brains our country has produced, he is remembered as much for his human touch and so many simple, unprovoked kindnesses, as he is for his immense practical skill and research acumen.

It is fitting too, that for a man devoted to the most intricate knowledge of the human heart and its many afflictions, that he touched the hearts of so many people.

I knew Professor Mayosi primarily as a member of the UCT Council, where his passion for our university, its transformation, academic excellence and intellectual pursuits, and his deep and abiding commitment to our students, were defining characteristics.

I will miss his easy, quiet and unassuming demeanor, his warmth and his insights which were rooted in a deep sense of social justice and fairness, which for him were never incompatible with academic excellence. He was clear that we can only ever achieve our true potential – as a people, an institution, and indeed society – if we confront our past, transform the present and create a future in which, those that for so long have been excluded and alienated are mainstreamed.

Indeed, Bongani was an embodiment of everything that we should aspire to. He was the quintessential scholar and a gentleman. He was caring and compassionate, clear-eyed and undoubtedly incredibly clever. He was an everyman – salt of the earth and at the same time, the cream of the crop.

He changed perceptions the world over, of the true potential of research from African institutions, and he built invaluable and lasting communities among researchers and practitioners across the world, and especially in Africa.

I dare not repeat what you are likely to hear many times today; a catalogue of his accomplishments, but you need only look around to see that his legacy will go on, and will multiply as each of the students whose lives he enriched, and to whom he provided so much inspiration and courage, go on in the world and follow his example.

As I replay my engagements with Bongani over the past few years, it is especially heart-breaking for me to now realise the desperate turmoil he was going through. But I say this knowing that, in the final analysis, one of his greatest contributions may have been to create the space for a more honest discussion about this demon called depression that stalks amongst us.

We are increasingly hearing about successful societal leaders who chose to take their lives without anyone around them expecting it to happen. We need to open up about this and support each other; maybe this way many lives can be saved.

Many university students worldwide experience mental health difficulties ranging from temporary distress and anxiety to more persistent and debilitating mental or psychological conditions.

Depression among young university students can be a very debilitating illness. Due to the fact that one of the areas most affected by depression is cognitive functioning, students therefore feel “helpless” and “useless” in the space of academia as they lack the capacity to engage with their academic demands as they would under normal circumstances. Attention and concentration is severely compromised disturbing the very functions necessary for classroom or lecture room engagement.

The SWS in the past three years had seen an exponential increase in the number of students presenting with mental health difficulties and an increase in the number of complex clinical presentations. The top five among these conditions being depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, trauma and adjustment issues.

In the past week, again, as people have reflected on his life, there is also a growing acknowledgement of how the ongoing struggle to meaningfully transform every aspect of our society, can compound the effects of this crippling illness.

It is perhaps a sign of the enormity of the tragedy of his passing, and our limited capacity to resolve the conflicts that so many see in the stuttering transformation of our society, that so many people across the spectrum, have tried to assign blame for his death. Perhaps Bongani is shaking his head at all of this, not least of all because of his deep and abiding faith, and the sense of tolerance and forgiveness that it requires.

After all, in testimonial after testimonial, it is clear that he had the capacity to bring people together, to push people beyond their own self-made limitations, to find solutions to insoluble problems, and to challenge convention – so often with spectacular results.

Yet it is perhaps ironic, that this impressive ability to see all sides of an argument, and his relentless search for a perfect resolution that seemed out of reach to others, often put him at odds with those who were – themselves – on seemingly different sides of fundamental issues.

I believe that we should honour the memory of this wonderful human being, this intellectual giant, by asking ourselves some fundamental questions. I would caution though, or even urge that in doing so we don't prematurely jump into ill-considered, accusatory, opportunistic and divisive conclusions that do not equip us to take on the next battle in the fight for a transformed University:

Why would anyone question a leading academic's personal commitment to academic transformation, despite so much evidence to the contrary?

Was there enough institutional and peer support for an academic who had indicated he was struggling to bear the burdens of his illness and his office?

And have we become so bloody-minded and entrenched in defending our own positions – whatever they may be – that we have lost the ability to listen, to view each other as human beings, and to act with empathy and kindness.

Hindsight is perfect sight: some say, we were wrong to appoint him Dean. He'd just been appointed when I assumed leadership of Council. Had he not been appointed, given his impeccable credentials that are spoken about since his passing, I would have demanded an answer on why he was overlooked.

In November I had lunch with him at Rhodes Memorial to understand why he wanted to resign as Dean and to discourage him from doing so. Secondly to obtain his advice on a successor to VC role. In the event Max Price beat me to it as Bongani told me they'd reached a workable agreement which pleased me.

The new VC Prof Phakeng and I were in constant discussion about his future role at the university, from a DVC: Research to Pro VC roles. Both of these meaningful leadership roles that played to his great strengths.

Is it possible that, where we thought we were doing everything we could to retain what was obviously a great talent, we may have conducted ourselves as mindless transformation zealots that had no consideration for his health and well-being?

If he was as happy with these options, as I was told he was, why would he take his life? Could we have moved earlier, faster and more empathetically? What else could we have done to place his state of mind on a positive trajectory? I ask myself.

There is no "right" or "wrong" in the views that have been put forward around why Bongani chose to end his life last week. We all are entitled to our own views.

But really, only Bongani really knew.

Only Bongani knew what it was like to achieve as he did – and that not everyone would appreciate that.

Only Bongani knew what it was like to take his own life – but then, and only then ... when it was too late, -- we would appreciate the role he played in all our lives, and appreciate that he was a leader, a role-model, a person we should all have looked up to.

There are lessons for all of us in this.

There are lessons in how we channel our expectations of black excellence. There are lessons in how we express those expectations. And there are lessons in how these expectations and expressions can impact people that we believe to be exceptional.

If there is one thing we must take away from the loss of our friend, our colleague, our great intellectual, it is that success can be a lonely place. Achievement brings with it the expectation of even greater achievement. It brings with it the desire for even greater success, and it brings with it the sense of even greater pressure.

Each of us will miss Bongani in different, very profound ways, but it is up to us find constructive ways, that are true to his spirit of tenacity and curiosity and kindness, to truly honour his memory. May his soul rest in everlasting peace.

Lala ngoxolo, Radebe, Bhungane, Ndlebe ntle zombini. Mafuz'afele, Hlubi

Khaya lakwaMayosi noKhumalo ngxe, thuthuzelekani. Akuhlanga lungehlanga. Lalani ngenxeba