

RHODES UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED OLD RHODIAN AWARD 2016
ACCEPTANCE SPEECH: MBUSOWEMVELO MTSHALI
27 AUGUST 2016

Programme Director; Professor Walker, Deputy Vice-Chancellors; Professor Boughey and Dr. Clayton, Old Rhodian Award Committee members, fellow Distinguished Old Rhodian Award recipients, members of the Rhodes University community, ladies and gentlemen.

A few months ago I was reading the electronic Rhodes Alumni newsletter and I was amazed and, at the same time, proud of the achievements of the Rhodes University alumni, not only in our beautiful country, South Africa, but globally. Looking at my modest achievements to date, I was certain that, though I would dearly love to be a member of the exclusive Distinguished Old Rhodian Award recipients, chances of that happening were very slim. I believed that I had not done enough for my name to deserve to be listed alongside my fellow Distinguished Old Rhodian Award recipients, who are honoured with me today, and those who have had the honour before us. I was convinced that my wish would remain but a dream.

On the 25th July 2016, when I read the email from Ms Terryl McCarthy, advising that I had been selected to receive the Distinguished Old Rhodian Award 2016, I initially thought it was a mistake. On occasions like these, words fail one when one needs them most and my response to Ms McCarthy was “It is not often that I find myself not knowing what to say, but this is one of those rare moments. I am speechless; this was completely unexpected.” I am of the firm view that the Distinguished Old Rhodian Award is the ultimate honour that this prestigious institution, with a proud and rich history, can extend to its alumni. I fully appreciate its profound significance and that being the case; I cannot help but feel inadequate and being the least deserving of such a great honour. Even today, I still find it hard to accept the fact that my miniscule efforts have amounted to

any noticeable contribution. I am greatly humbled and honoured to be receiving this award and it is with utmost humility that I accept it.

I would like to thank Ms McCarthy, who nominated me and everyone who supported my nomination. I do not have adequate words to truly express my appreciation and gratitude for this incredible recognition.

It is an indisputable fact that I have not made this journey alone. I have had more than my fair share of support that, I would be the first to admit, has made this journey possible. The good Lord has been extremely generous, kind and continues to bless me richly every day and without his extraordinary love and generosity, things could have turned out differently. My parents Bhekuyise and Qondeni Mtshali, inculcated the value of education in us, their three children, at an early age, and for that I shall be eternally grateful to them.

It is our late former president Nelson Mandela who stated in his book “Long Walk to Freedom”:

“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of a mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates us from another person.”

I am extremely proud of my late labourer father and housewife mother.

I am indebted to my late brother, Vusumuzi, who convinced my parents that, despite the shortage of money, sending me to boarding school would be the best thing for me; as much as it had it had been for him and my sister Sibongile. I acknowledge the role of my sister in my career and she continues to be my pillar of strength. My sister had to take a long trip from Mahlabathini to Port Elizabeth to visit me in prison when I was detained at St. Albans prison (I shall elaborate on my detention later), the only time she had to set her foot in a prison environment.

She had to leave her only child, Nozuko, who was less than a year old at that time, to undertake that trip. She and my mother have taught me that humility is invaluable.

It is a long distance from Mahlabathini, where I was born and grew up, to Grahamstown. I was fortunate enough that my late cousin Muntu Mntambo, his wife, Nomawabo, and their children opened up their home in Alice to be my home away from home. In 1988, I and three other Rhodes University students were detained under the State of Emergency. I regard myself lucky in the sense that I spent a relatively short period of three months at St. Albans Prison in Port Elizabeth, having spent two weeks of that time in solitary confinement at Alicedale Police Station. My cousin Muntu came to visit me in prison. I noticed tears welling in his eyes when we were talking through the glass window, because physical contact was prohibited. Being a proud Black African male, it is something that he would deny ever happened. He really cared. The support that I received from aunts, especially my aunt Ainah Cele and her children, uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces based in the various parts of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal, was amazing.

The other person who deserves acknowledgment and my sincere gratitude is Ms Nomandlovu Madlakana. In 1987, if my memory serves me well, I did not have a bursary that would cover my full tuition and accommodation fees for the year and I was required to pay the dreaded Minimum Initial Payment, MIP for short. I had tried everything possible to raise the funds with no success and I had resigned myself to the inevitability of packing my bags and going back home. Ms Madlakana, who was studying towards her final year BProc degree at the time, was neither a friend nor a family member. She probably knew me as one of those young men, doing a BProc degree, full of ambition, hopes and dreams of being a hot shot lawyer one day. When she heard of my plight, she advised me that she would talk to her parent who might be able to assist with the funding towards my studies. A few days later, she came back with a cheque of a few thousand Rands that were required for my fees and my premature trip back

home was averted. There was neither a document signed nor collateral required. She had confidence in me – she was confident that I would complete my studies and that I would pay back the money (Ladies and Gentlemen, I must hasten to add that I am using the phrase *“Pay back the money”* in a completely different context to the notorious connotations it has acquired currently in the South African political context☺). I did pay back the money.

My life has been enriched by coming across some exemplary young individuals.

- Nondumiso Gwala came into my life when she was awarded the inaugural Sanlam Investments CEO Bursary on completing her Grade 12 and I was selected to be her mentor. She completed her B.Com Honours in Financial Management at Rhodes in 2011 and she is currently a Junior Dealer at Sanlam Investments.
- Mfana Khanyile and BK Taoana are the first and second recipients, respectively, of the Rhodes University Black Students Alumni Fund bursary, which we established a few years ago.
- Mfana will be admitted as an attorney in October 2016, which was initially scheduled to take place in August, whilst BK’s admission will take place next year. Both of them are with top tier legal firms.

Prior to meeting these young individuals, I believed that my personal circumstances when I grew up and during my studies were difficult but after hearing of their personal circumstances, I realised that theirs have been tougher. I had to acknowledge that I actually had it easier than them and that I should be more grateful. I have no doubt that they will be successful in their chosen careers and in their lives. In different ways, each one of them epitomises the veracity of the fact that one’s background and personal circumstances should not be the sole determinant of how far and how high one can go in life. All one needs, is sheer determination, accompanied by ambition, hard work, steadfast commitment to one’s goal and a little bit of luck here and there. I thank these young individuals for giving me, albeit inadvertently, an instructive lesson in life. They are my inspiration.

Other than my friends, relatives and colleagues that I have been blessed with and who have supported me along the way I would like to thank my wonderful children; my daughter, Xara and my son, Simphiwe. They are my most precious gift. Lastly but, certainly by no means, least I would like to thank the woman in my life, Ms Beulah Oliver, who continues to provide me with her unwavering support. The significance of the fact that I am receiving this recognition less than two weeks before our 20th anniversary is not lost to me.

In February 2013, when I had the privilege of being the keynote speaker during the opening function of the Law Faculty, my speech touched on the importance of ethics in our society and other attributes that I wish Rhodes Law graduates should have. Today I would like to suggest that Rhodes University should not only be known as an institution ‘Where Leaders Learn’ but it should be an institution where leaders who are prepared to serve learn. I firmly believe that, what our country critically needs most at the moment is servant leadership.

In my view, the leading thesis on the subject of servant leadership is contained in the book by Brand Pretorius; “In the Driving Seat – Lessons in Leadership”, wherein he felicitously defines servant leadership as follows:

“What else sets servant leaders apart? They have a strong sense of ethics and a high level of self-awareness. They listen intently to others and seek to understand. Servant leaders have empathy. They are kind but not weak, strong but not rude. They believe sincerely that leadership is not about rank, standing or authority. They suppress their egos and need for power but rather earn their influence by serving their people. They are humble but not timid, proud but not arrogant. When a leader comes from a place of service, subordinates are empowered rather than controlled, and asked rather told. Servant leaders genuinely care about all their people, regardless of colour or creed and put the needs of others before their own. They honour and live by the spirit of Ubuntu. They do not only get, they also give. They are healers and unifiers and through their caring they make the world a better place.....

It is a misconception that servant leaders are weaklings or pushovers. They are bold but not bullies.... They focus on the behaviour and not the person..... They have the guts to take tough decisions but they implement those with compassion and empathy. Servant leaders are tough-minded when it comes to results but they are gentle when it comes to people.”

I am certain that most of you will agree with me that Rhodes University is in an extremely enviable position to have a servant leader at its helm, in Dr. Sizwe Mabizela, especially at this challenging time in the history of universities in South Africa.

I would be comfortable if those that I have the privilege to lead believe that I exhibit a few of the servant leadership attributes outlined above. It is a journey and not a destination.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to dedicate this Award not only to the persons I have mentioned earlier, but to my fellow Rhodes University Black Students Fund founding members and contributors who continue to make a remarkable difference in the lives of young law students who richly deserve the support.

My journey as an ambassador of this eminent institution continues.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you once again.