

## ***Rhodes University: A Different Place***

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Rhodes University was a very different place 25 years ago. It was a place where a handful of black students (African, Indian and coloured) were allowed entry with the special permission of their respective racial authorities. It was a place to which these students could be denied access at the whim of a state official.

Grahamstown was a very different place. The only cinema barred all coloured and African students from its premises. The eating places barred all students of colour. The first day when I visited the town with my parents, my mom and I were unceremoniously asked to leave the Wimpy Bar when we wanted to buy a sandwich and a cup of tea. The local people had no hope or very little hope of their children attending Rhodes. Instead, the most they could dream of was being lucky enough to find work as domestics or drivers so that they could put food on their tables.

To coincide with the centenary celebrations, the university launched *A Story of Rhodes: Rhodes University 1904 to 2004*, in June 2004. It is insightful how this time is recorded.

One page of the 100-year history records a year of turbulence on the campus. One paragraph on page 93 refers to an experience that dominated my life as a student. The paragraph reads as follows:

For a number of years Rhodes followed its pattern of ensuring a place for any qualified student, either at Rhodes or at Fort Hare, and then went along with the government's insistence on ministerial permission for black African students at Rhodes. When their numbers approached 100, however, Rhodes started to spread them throughout its residence system. Government officials quickly reacted in 1977, and Rhodes, with the agreement of its black African students, put them in separate residences in 1978.

This paragraph requires careful examination.

Rhodes did not only go along with 'the government's insistence on ministerial permission for black African students'. It went along with special permission for all students of colour. I was one of those students who was given special permission to attend Rhodes. As a graduate of UCT, I came to Rhodes to study journalism. I was a 'special permission' student. The Department of Coloured Affairs gave me special permission to study in terms of vague criteria that allowed students of colour to attend the white universities if they could prove that the subjects they wanted to study were not on offer at their exclusive university. The Senate of the University gave me special permission to complete the journalism degree over two years. Through the intervention of Professor Tony Giffard, I was allowed to do Journalism one and two concur-

rently in the first year of study and Journalism three in the second year. My Rhodes experience from that point of view was rather unusual.

By going along with the government's insistence, Rhodes immediately conferred second class status on a whole lot of us. But there was a pretense – always a pretense. Most white students were oblivious of the fact that we were there with special permission. There were some who were rather surprised that we were there at all. A fellow student living in Winchester House with me was more frank than most. Hailing from a school in Pretoria, she said that she was shocked and could not understand why we were at Rhodes. We were five black girls in the house with her and she said she had not expected this. She had been told that we have a low IQ and so could not understand how it was possible that we were sharing her residence with her. The irony of the situation was that she was registered to do a diploma in pre-school education because she had not qualified to complete a degree. Three of us were doing journalism degrees, one a law degree and one her honours in mathematics. But we were the ones considered to have the low IQ and not to be treated as full students on this campus.

The events of 1978 however forced these issues into the public domain. Any student on the campus during that year cannot justifiably claim not to have known what was going on. If they did not know, they were both blind and deaf because Rhodes was a very different place then. Suddenly in the second half of the year, the government announced that black students (coloured, Indian and African) could no longer live in residence with their white counterparts. With the final exam looming, we were suddenly embroiled in a political crisis and looked to the Vice-Chancellor and the university administration to defend us.

Our official historians say: '... Government officials quickly reacted in 1977, and Rhodes, with the agreement of its black African students, put them in separate residences in 1978'.

That such crude inaccuracies could still be acceptable ten years into our democracy speaks volumes about the historical distortions that will continue to be perpetuated unless we tell our own stories.

Allow me to tell you what happened that year. Students of colour – all black students, African, Indian and coloured, did not agree to go into separate residences. We were forced against our will to go into separate residences. And the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Derek Henderson, knew that we were opposed to the university's position. When we first heard that we would be without accommodation, we held a series of meetings to discuss what we could do. At no stage did the university administration indicate to us that they would stand by us, that they would not accept that their students be treated in this cavalier fashion. Not only did we come as second class citizens with special permission, but now we were casually to be evicted from our rooms. The numbers of students affected were about 50 as far as I can remember. When we marched on the administration and held a meeting with the V-C, there was no acknowledgement of our

feelings. There was no statement of outrage. There was no protest from the highest echelons of the university.

We ended the academic year uncertain of our futures, uncertain about where we would live the next year. Bear in mind that Grahamstown generally had limited accommodation and it was not easy for students to find places outside the residences. Also many parents were not eager to allow younger students to live off campus.

The first I was to hear of the university's official response to the state's attack on us was when I received a call from the V-C's office. I was informed that the university had decided to set up two residences – one for men and one for women – exclusively for students of colour. The request that the V-C was making to me was whether I would take up the offer of being warden of the women's residence. I knew immediately that this would not be an option. I just could not see myself accepting apartheid accommodation. This was not discussed with us. We were told of the university decision. When we returned to campus the following year, we had our first informal discussion and decided that we did not have an option, that we had nowhere else to go. I believed that it was the right thing for students to accept the accommodation, although we had not wanted it. We did not ask for it. It was forced upon us.

When I saw those separate buildings I just knew that I would never be able to bear it. That same afternoon, I literally ran up and down the streets of Grahamstown searching for accommodation. I found a derelict building at the dip on Raglan Road next to a shop. The shopkeeper pointed me to the owner who agreed to fix up the doors and windows, give me paint so that my friends could paint the place and reluctantly allowed myself and Ephne Williams to move in. That is where we stayed for the rest of 1979.

In the late seventies, the apartheid state was strong. It had killed Steve Biko. It was crushing the black consciousness movement in the Eastern Cape in particular. It ruled by decree. In a sense I can understand why it was impossible for the university to stand up against such authoritarianism. I can understand as I look back that perhaps the administration did not have the strength to fight the state. What I cannot understand is that we were never told: listen chaps, we are not happy about this and we are going to help you in every way. We think it is appalling what is happening and we just cannot be seen to be openly opposing the state. No. We were not told this. Instead we were up against the university administration and the state together. The university choose to go along with the state, not with its students.

What I further cannot understand is why there is this continued pretense that Rhodes University stood up for freedom of association and freedom of speech. Rhodes University did not even defend its own students who were there purely on merit.

Today I serve on the Council of this University. As a Council member I proceed with caution. I want this great institution to be even greater. I want it to

express a true non-racialism. I want it to create a space where we all feel we can tell our stories and where our experiences are acknowledged.

What I tell here is only in broad outline the events of those times. This does not pretend to be a scholarly and thorough record of that time. For it to be so requires painstaking research. The students who were here at that time should be tracked down and interviewed. The relevant authorities should be interviewed as well. A collection of this information would allow us to draw a reasonably balanced picture of an awful episode in the history of this university. This process may be just what the university needs to truly diversify. For as long as it does not acknowledge how very different the experiences of so many of us were, for so long will it continue to believe that it can continue to assimilate those who come to Rhodes today into the dominant culture. Rhodes is a very different place today. Yet how different is it? As a Council member, I say with great difficulty that I do not feel part of a team. I feel instead as an appendage. I will always feel as an appendage and not integrated for as long as there is no true diversity. I serve too on the Council of the Peninsula Technikon where I meet men, women of all colours and creeds at meetings that forced a South Africanness upon us. I have no intention here of blaming anybody. Instead I throw this challenge to all of us. How will we create a Rhodes that is South African and not British or Rhodesian? Truly acknowledging its past, its British history but moving into a new future.

While I am fascinated by the broad philosophical questions that this Colloquium has opened up, in the end I believe intellectual activity cannot be truly alive unless it can inform our daily practice – that we need to act and do. That we need to test the intellectual theories that we hold. It is with this in mind that I would like to challenge the Faculty of Humanities to commit itself to engaging its students to put on record the experiences of these unfortunate times lest we forget. Lest we forget that there was a time when so many went along with the machinations of the state and abandoned their intellectual duty and denied their souls. Lest we forget that if we are not constantly reminded we can easily follow this route again.

The second challenge I would like to make relates to this institution's relationship with this town. Grahamstown is South African in microcosm. It is a different place yet it is the same. When I speak to the citizens who live at the other end of town, they continue to see the University as something separate to them where they seek employment. While there have been many initiatives to connect the University to all residents, it appears that much more has to be done for citizens to understand and take ownership of that which is rightly theirs. Last year, 27 students in the local township passed with matric exemption. The University has no record of how many of these students have come to the Rhodes. Admirably, Rhodes has awarded local students two additional points to help them qualify more easily to be admitted. The skewed development in this area requires more than this. I would like to challenge the University to

consider admitting all these students and helping them with financial support. If that Pretoria High School student a quarter of a century ago could have been admitted on the basis of not having met the criteria but being allowed to do a diploma course, why not create the opportunities for the Grahamstown learner?

This University prides itself that it is in the black. Perhaps it should make the investment now that will not only compensate for years of injustice but also assure the people of this town that this is their University. Perhaps when I one day say Rhodes is a different place it will truly be a different place.