

Feel good



“Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person.” (Mother Teresa)

How much do **YOU** care about people around you?

By Prof Kobus Maree

Please stop for a moment and consider what it means to be given the opportunity to study at Tukkies. It's easy to agree with the following statement: Here, now, is a splendid opportunity to realise your potential, one that you must grab with both hands. Here is your chance to get a degree (or many degrees); to meet wonderful friends; to learn from the very best lecturers imaginable; to qualify to become the career practitioner you have always wanted to be, whether a medical doctor, an architect, a teacher, a lawyer, an engineer, an accountant ... to name but a few. Furthermore, studying will equip you with survival skills that will help you to move ahead in life, to find a job in which you can be happy and design a successful life. This is a fact: For the vast majority of students, studying at the University of Pretoria (UP) represents the fulfilment of a life-long dream.

If life consists of choices, here is an opportunity that you can't miss.

I now wish to ask you two questions: Firstly, what made you decide to become what you intend to become? In other words, which factors, influences or people helped you make up your mind regarding a field of study? A teacher? Your parents? A career counsellor? Your friends? TV?

Secondly: Please define the word “job”, work, career or whichever term you prefer to describe what you want to become after completing your studies, and reflect on the environment in which you wish to realise your potential.

Finished thinking? I wish you could share your answers with me in person!

Now consider the word “career”. Here is a definition coined by Prof Mark Savickas, global leader in the field of career counselling, and a scholar who received an honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria in 2009 for his pioneering work in the field of career counselling: A career provides a mechanism for social integration as

well as for making a social contribution. In other words, the purpose of work is twofold: a) to achieve self-completion (realise your potential so you can find a job, earn a decent income and provide for your family) but also b) to make social contributions through one's work (namely, to give something back to society).

Does this definition sound acceptable to you? Or have you never given the second part a thought? You will probably be interested to learn that the notion of making a social contribution is not limited to the field of career counselling only, neither is it even particularly new. Quite the opposite! Those of you who have read my article on emotional-social intelligence in a previous issue of the JuniorTukkie would probably have noticed that “social responsibility” is one of the key facets of emotional-social intelligence intelligence.

You may remember that I urged you to find practical ways of helping

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others, in other words, to make social contributions. Again, this is nothing new. Universities across the world have for a long time accepted the principle of making it compulsory for students to do exactly this. Whether we call this endeavour community engagement, service learning, facilitating social justice, community service or community upliftment is immaterial. The only thing that matters is that the idea of social responsibility is a good one, and that it is here to stay.

The fact that we live in a global village forces us to make students aware of the need not only to study and live well for themselves, but also for others. This is the reason why medical doctors and many other professionals are compelled to do a two-year community service stint after having qualified. We need to plough back into our communities because we have no choice but to reach out to others – to the voiceless, the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable members of society, to those whose very existence and well-being depend on the goodwill of others. Robert Kennedy summed up this principle in the following words: “As long as there is plenty, poverty is evil.” Closer to home, Anton Rupert commented: “As my buurman honger slaap, kan ek nie gerus slaap nie.”

So, then. Soon after enrolling at UP, you will be introduced to the uplifting, exciting and challenging world of community service. However, despite not being allowed to decline taking part in community outreach programmes, it remains your choice as to whether you will complete your community service assignments grudgingly and reluctantly (“only because I have to do so”), or whether you will find this part of your studies a most enlightening and inspiring, enriching part of your student years.

At the risk of repeating myself, I wish to emphasise the following: The degree that you will eventually obtain from UP, will in due course become immaterial; a mere piece of paper to prove that you once spent some time in the hallowed halls of this respected and stately institution. What will matter down the years will be whether you really care for others and whether you use your talents in the service of others and not

only yourself. It is important that you understand that, in doing something for others, you are contributing to the general welfare of humanity at large. When the bell tolls, it tolls for you.

The words of Jesus (Matthew 25:40) ring curiously true here: “The King will answer them, ‘I tell you with certainty, since you did it for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.’”

I have always believed that we should not expect the government alone to try and change the lives of the poor. If we really wish to see change happen in South Africa, we all need to become involved. By giving of ourselves. By donating food, clothing, money, our time and expertise. By urging our friends and colleagues to do likewise. By encouraging corporate business to donate funding.

There is so much we can do. The good news is that, in giving, we receive, and abundantly so. I could share wonderful and uplifting stories, such as psychiatric patients who were healed by taking care of others, by shifting their inner focus from their own pain and problems to focussing on the pain and needs of others. I can personally attest to this. In fact, sometimes, in the middle of a large informal settlement or dilapidated township, I marvel at the love and acceptance that people so graciously and effortlessly bestow upon myself and my co-workers.

After involvement in numerous community upliftment projects over many years, I can honestly state that the one facet of my life that has never failed to raise my spirits in troubled times is being in the fortunate position to do something for others, especially those that cannot defend themselves. To share in the pain but also the love of others, to try to make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable but also the most inspiring sector of society has been a rich reward indeed. What the defenceless and the vulnerably have given me in return, is priceless: a deep sense of fulfilment and gratitude for the opportunity to be able to do what I do.

A last word: Mother Teresa received the Nobel Prize for Peace for her efforts among the dying, the poorest of the

poor and the destitute. In doing so, she became a role model whose laudable and selfless efforts have virtually elevated her to the status of a saint. A deeply respected and beloved icon, she continues to inspire millions of persons across the globe to make a change in the lives of others. She will live forever in the hearts and minds of those who strive to emulate what she has done, thereby honouring her legacy.

Isn't it great to know that you, too, have the talent to become a role model, a person whose mere name conjures up timeless values?

Please note that you do not need to be a millionaire to bring about change in the lives of others. Neither do you have to begin your efforts in the deepest part of Africa. Charity still begins at home. Just open your eyes, heart and mind to what is happening around you and you will soon discover the myriad of opportunities that exist to make a change for the better in your environment. As someone once said: Blossom where God has planted you.

If my experience is anything to go by, this is a guaranteed way to make sure that the world at large respects you: I have learnt over the years that the world values nothing more than one's willingness to help others. Does the name Nelson Mandela ring a bell?

“The other day I dreamed that I was at the gates of heaven. And St. Peter said, ‘Go back to Earth. There are no slums up here’”

(Mother Teresa quoted in conversation with Prince Michael of Greece in 1996).