

No holy cows for Saunders at UCT

By Pierre de Vos

"One day I would like to go back to being a full-time physician," confesses Dr Stuart Saunders, vice-chancellor and principal of the University of Cape Town who was chief physician at Groote Schuur Hospital before his appointment as principal in 1981.

Dr Saunders, whose medical career took him from Groote Schuur to Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital before he settled down to the job as senior lecturer in medicine at UCT in 1961, is a medical man through and through. His speech is peppered with medical metaphors and he says that even his appointment as vice-chancellor couldn't keep him away from at least some involvement in medicine. He has been an honorary consultant on the joint staff of Groote Schuur since 1983 and earlier this year became a honorary fellow of the College of Medicine of South Africa.

Dr Saunders, a member of Idasa's board of trustees, was appointed as vice-chancellor after being deputy principal (planning) for only three years. "I didn't find the transition from being a doctor to running the university difficult at all," he says in his spacious wood-panelled office on the lower campus. In fact, he believes that there are striking similarities between the two jobs. "As a physician one deals with people all the time. Similarly, as vice-chancellor it is important to be able to listen to other people's problems. One must be prepared to become involved in dialogue and discussion."

In the recurrent clashes between students and the police on the UCT campus Dr Saunders has shown his commitment to resolve these conflicts by drawing both sides into a discussion. He has become a familiar figure at these incidents, always occupying the middle ground between the police and students and calling for calm — from both sides. "My main aim is to get a peaceful resolution of the seemingly inevitable conflict," he says. Not that he ap-



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proves of the way in which the police normally handles the explosive situation created by their presence. "I believe that the right to peaceful demonstration is a fundamental part of democracy. We don't want the police on the campus to enforce their political will, but when a clash is looming I try to negotiate with the police to create the opportunity for the students to protest for at least a fair amount of time."

Saunders' commitment to freedom of speech and the right to criticism and protest goes back a long way. In his inaugural address in 1981 he already stressed that "there can be no 'holy cows' immune to analysis and criticism". But this alone would not make UCT a respected and outstanding place of learning, he warned. "It is essential that the university should always seek the highest possible scholastic accomplishments in recruiting and promoting staff. A university which doesn't give pride of place to scholarship will soon become an intellectual desert."

The university should on the other hand make sure that it is open to all and that entrance criteria are laid down by the university, and not politicians.

"In laying down these criteria one should realise that although we are part of the inter-

national academic community, we are a university of Africa and a university in South Africa. Black and white youth in South Africa arrive at the university with totally different experiences. Universities give a crucial opportunity for these young people to live and learn together and this is crucial for the future of South Africa," Saunders says. "There aren't many places where white and black people can really meet as equals. That is why universities have such a crucial mission, because they are paving the way for how South Africa will be one day."

In a way then, that which is happening more or less spontaneously in the university enclave is being nurtured outside by organisations like Idasa. Saunders' commitment to Idasa's work is therefore not surprising. "When Alex Boraine and Van Zyl Slabbert asked me to serve on Idasa's board I accepted immediately," Saunders recalls. "I think that Idasa's attempts to increase dialogue and debate in this country is crucial in ensuring a peaceful future. And I am delighted that they have made good progress in bringing people together."

Apart from his full-time duties as vice-chancellor Dr Saunders is also kept busy by his involvement with the National Botanic Gardens of which he has been a trustee since 1982. He is also a trustee of the Chris Barnard Fund and the Higher Education Trust, and in 1985 he served as president of the South African Institute of Race Relations.

His main concern at present, however, still stems from the squeeze on finances. "It worries me tremendously that we won't have enough money to maintain our high standards at the university," he says. The increase in the number of black students means that more funds will be needed for academic support programmes. The apartheid system, and the accompanying inferior education system for blacks, have created a tremendous need for programmes and finance to enable black students to overcome these handicaps.

But Dr Saunders remains optimistic. "When one has success in raising funds and one can see a realisation in productive terms of the idealism and drive of students, it does something for me, it gives me hope and satisfaction."

But a long, uphill battle still lies ahead before Dr Saunders will be able to go back to being a physician — something he dearly wants to do.

SOCIAL HISTORY TOURS OF ALEXANDRA

On the doorstep of Johannesburg, just down Louis Botha Avenue, over 140 000 people live on just two square kilometres of land.

It is another world for most white South Africans: one of overcrowded homes, shack settlements, bucket toilets, impassable roads and fragmented upgrading.

It is also a township with a rich history: from bus boycotts and notorious gangsterism in the 1950s to the famous Mayekiso trial last year. Attempts by the government to turn it into a hostel town failed in the seventies and now there is a new attempt to transform it into an elite township.

Idasa has developed a social history tour of

the township.

The tour, which lasts about two hours, takes participants from one corner of the township to the other and includes places where history was made, the squatter camps, the site of the so-called people's courts which was the focus of the Mayekiso treason trial and the upgrading programmes.

It begins at the Alexandra Art Centre and ends at a shebeen where participants get the opportunity to meet community leaders. The tour also stops at one or two places where again participants are able to meet residents.

Idasa will also provide fact sheets on:

- Facts and figures on the township.

- History of Alexandra.
- The implications of the Joint Management System for the township.

Idasa provides the transport — an Alexandra taxi — which accommodates about 15 people. The cost is R30 per person while students, pensioners and unemployed need only pay R10. These rates are negotiable.

If you would like to come on a tour or would like your company, organisation or friends to come as a group, please contact us at 011-4033580 or write to us at P.O. Box 32804, Braamfontein, 2017. Tours are run during the week and on weekends.