

Zuleika Nortjé

25 January 1964 -15 August 2014

All of us have known Zuleika in our own special way. For us in the Faculty of Health and Wellness Sciences at CPUT, she was more than just a colleague – she was a friend to many of us, a mentor to countless number of students and a true champion in the development and offering of the Dental Assisting programme.

I have known Zuleika probably for as long as I've been at CPUT... the past 30-odd years. From the very beginning, she almost single-handedly took the responsibility of our Dental Assisting programme - and indeed over many years she had built it up to be one of the strongest in the country. As mentioned earlier, she introduced some unique features to this programme of which she was very proud. One of these was the establishment of strong working relationships with the dentistry faculties of Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape and continuing with UWC's dentistry fraternity. This activity allowed her dental assisting students to work alongside dentistry students and by so doing, prepared them appropriately for the working environment.



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Zuleika was not only interested in her students developing practising skills in their discipline, but also equipping them with the appropriate knowledge base. As a result, her qualified students were sought after and well-suited for practice. For Zuleika, preparing students with the appropriate skills and knowledge in dental assisting was only one aspect. Her vision was also to develop them into practitioners with the correct mental attitude and empathy as she realised they needed to be mature and emotionally strong, since they had to deal with people who have different needs. Hence, she expected her students to have the highest professional standards in terms of patient care.

Zuleika undertook another task some years ago when she and her students made teddybears for sick children. Allow me just to say a few words about this. The newspaper, Rapport, wrote an article on this event with the title: "Teddiebere steel kinders se harte in hospitaal" In the article, Zuleika is quoted by saying: "Eendag het 'n kind in 'n saal van die Tygerberg hospitaal wakker geword, opgestaan en heel rustig met sy skoene op die vloer begin speel. Net daar het ek besluit dit kan nie so aangaan nie". Dié gesig het Zuleika Nortje, aangespoor om die Teddiebeerprojek te begin. Die projek streef daarna om aan kinders in die hospitaal -- veral dié wat lank daar deurbring, soos kankerpatiëntjies , 'n teddiebeer te gee. That year she and her students produced 150 teddy-bears.

Her compassion for people was further manifested by the selfless charitable work she undertook, much of it in a most discreet manner. A while back when I was requested to speak at a meeting of people in the dental field, I asked her what I should emphasise on. Her immediate reaction was "Operation Smile". Operation Smile is an organisation that encourages practices to provide free surgeries to repair cleft lip, cleft palate and other facial deformities of children. Just the thought of what joy some surgery could bring to children, largely from poor backgrounds, brought tears to her eyes.

Zuleika was scholarly in many ways. When a few years ago, the HPCS showed concern about a shortage of registered dental assistants and requested that we double up our student intake, there was no hesitation from Zuleika to do just that, although it meant a far bigger academic load that she had to carry.

To me Zuleika was a model lecturer, hardworking, honest and trustworthy, well-liked by her peers and colleagues, highly competent and respected by her students. We will miss Zuleika. She gave her everything for others. Let us take comfort that, although too brief, she had led a worthy life. Let us champion the causes she believed in, so that when we put on the smiles on the faces of people in our own lives, we can be assured that somewhere she has a smile on her face just like that of the Man above who watches over all of us.

This tribute to Zuleika, daughter of Professor Curly and Marie Nortje, was delivered by Professor Dhiro Gihwala, Dean, Faculty of Health and Wellness Sciences, Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Our heartfelt condolences go to Curly and Marie.