

A letter of gratitude to Walter Sisulu University medical school's founding Dean

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This letter was written by Prof. Sanjay Jeganathan, one of 12 students who were in the first cohort to study towards the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree at what is now Walter Sisulu University. The letter was written for a thanksgiving ceremony in honour of Prof. Marina Xaba-Mokoena. Founding Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, held in East London, South Africa, on 13 November 2022. Prof. Sikhumbuzo Mabunda edited certain aspects for clarity and is merely the corresponding author.

When I was asked by my Unitra colleagues Mvula Tshabalala and Mkhusele Mashiyi to write my thoughts on Prof. Xaba-Mokoena, I was humbled by that request. I am sad that I am not able to attend the ceremony today.

Prof. Xaba-Mokoena is a mum to us all. My memory goes back to the time when one Ms Grimsel was the secretary in the newly opened Faculty of Health Sciences office in the Science Faculty building at the University of Transkei – the year was 1984. I popped into this office and had a conversation with Ms Grimsel about applying for medicine at Unitra. I was in my first-year BSc at that time. Behind a half-open door, the newly appointed Dean was seated in her office. I was immediately struck by this immaculately dressed lady in a pinstripe suit, sitting behind a big desk and working away.

The Faculty of Health Sciences was established because of the burning desire of President Kaiser Matanzima to have a medical school to produce doctors to cater for the health needs of the people of Transkei. But as the advertisement in the *Daily Dispatch* newspaper stated, ‘... this is for Transkeian students only’. The success of my ambition to study medicine was therefore much in doubt. The Republic of South Africa would not take a non-white foreigner to do medicine. My father, who was a lecturer at Butterworth School of Education, discouraged me from applying, as he felt it was a futile effort. Yet I applied. In April 1985, I was called for an interview.

Prof. Xaba-Mokoena and a Prof. Roos were on the panel. Prof. Xaba-Mokoena asked me several questions, and one particular one was, ‘Why should I consider you over anyone else?’ I came up with many reasons, including my passion to heal people, and promised her that I would work hard to help ensure that the medical school succeeded in producing the very best doctors. Prof. said in her husky voice, ‘Well, we are spending millions of rands on building this medical school, and you had better make sure that all that will not be wasted.’

I returned home to Butterworth in a public transport kombi, into which the passengers were packed like sardines and which the driver drove at a terrifying 140 km per hour, and for the first time, I wanted to live long! I still remember when I got the news that I had been selected – I cried. I felt that God had spoken through Prof. Xaba to give me a lifeline, which I have cherished every day of my life since then. My background was that my family and I had had to run for our lives from Sri Lanka when our home was looted and burnt in 1983. Transkei and the people of the Eastern Cape embraced me as one of them. I do not know what Prof. saw in me – I was a foreigner, after all. And yet she decided to take me into the programme. The rest is history.

Throughout our six years at Unitra, Prof. looked after us just like a mum would look after her children. We were a close-knit group of students and were good friends, and we all worked very hard. Prof. was firm, always having this ‘no nonsense’ attitude – which was a good thing, as her task was near impossible. The apartheid government was not interested in this Bantustan medical school, and the South African Medical and Dental Council did not even want to know about it. Prof. Xaba-Mokoena worked very hard, and hired the best professors from the USA, the UK, Europe and rest of Africa to work there. She convinced the various teams that visited from the RSA to inspect our medical school and to see that we were trained as well as anyone else in South Africa. Prof. McGregor was a pillar of support, and others who visited to review our programme were so impressed with what Transkei was producing.

Later, when Prof. became Minister of Health, she took care of the Unitra medical students. I remember walking into her office one day to seek her help to get me paid as an intern, and she sorted it out immediately. Prof. had this stern look about her, and her eyes would look down and far as she spoke, in a very serious manner in her trademark husky voice, but sometimes at the end of it, she would give out a big laugh!

When I completed my medical studies, Groote Schuur Hospital offered me an internship. I went to Prof. to seek her advice. She listened to me, and then said, ‘I want you to remain at Mthatha Hospital.’ I wrote back declining the offer from Groote Schuur. I continued to work at Mthatha Hospital for a further three years, and when I decided to go and specialise, she gave me her blessing to go ahead. My plan was always to return to Mthatha, but sadly when my brother was shot and killed by car hijackers in 1997, we decided to move away from South Africa.

Having pursued radiology as my career and trained at Tygerberg Hospital, I now occupy a senior position in Australia and New Zealand as President of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists. I am the leader of more than 3 000 radiologists working in the two countries, and I owe this success to Prof. Xaba-Mokoena.

Mam, you made me what I am today, and I will always be very grateful for your giving me a lifeline to success. May God bless you with good health and lots of happiness.

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