

## 'Bongani Mayosi's legacy is a gift to UCT'

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Prof Salim Abdool Karim delivered the fourth annual Bongani Mayosi Memorial Lecture on Saturday, 28 January. [Photo Gallo Images.](#)

**An unusually cool summer's evening, with a blustery south-easter gripping the Mother City, set the stage for loved ones, friends, colleagues and mentees to gather to celebrate and pay homage to the life and legacy of an extraordinary son of the African soil, the late Professor Bongani Mayosi.**

Professor Mayosi, the highly respected and much-loved dean of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS), died in 2018. On Saturday, 28 January, on what would have been his 56th birthday, UCT partnered with the Bongani Mayosi Foundation to roll out the red carpet in his honour.

The programme for the hybrid event included the delivery of the fourth annual Bongani Mayosi Memorial Lecture by Professor Salim Abdool Karim, the director of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa, which was followed by a gala dinner.

### **A deep, wide-ranging legacy**

Described as a quintessential scholar who epitomised excellence, who led by flawless example and understood the importance of servant leadership, Mayosi was in a class of his own. His work and "Lift as you rise" philosophy were unparalleled. He left an indelible mark on South Africa, Africa and the globe.

Professor Elelwani Ramugondo, UCT's deputy vice-chancellor for transformation, student affairs and social responsiveness, said during her formal welcome to guests at the event that Mayosi had impacted the lives of countless colleagues and students, significantly inspiring their career trajectories.

Practising his philosophy to help uplift the oppressed and the burdened, she continued, he ensured that he left a deep and wide-ranging legacy, going far beyond his core work as a cardiologist, researcher and academic to find ways to address life-threatening medical conditions affecting primarily the poor and marginalised.

He also inspired colleagues across Africa to tackle uncharted research challenges.

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"He was like a telescope. He helped us to see far beyond our own lives [and examine] the needs of this country, the continent and the world. He believed in the power of people who have traditionally been overlooked in the world of science and medical research, especially Africans and women. This legacy is a gift to UCT," Professor Ramugondo said.

### **First encounter**

Professor Karim told guests that he had accepted the invitation with some trepidation, given Mayosi's outstanding scientific reputation.

"To stand in his shadow, [in] itself, is indeed an honour. Bongani Mayosi was a person who cared less about position, who cared less about career, but cared more about impact. He cared more about ensuring that he built institutions [that would] take our country forward [by] ensuring that we get the best medical care. That spoke volumes to me," he said.

It was during the University of KwaZulu-Natal's orientation programme many years ago that Karim first crossed paths with Mayosi. At the time, Mayosi was a first-year medical student, while Karim had been recruited by student leader and anti-apartheid activist Dr Aaron Motsoaledi to participate in the faculty's orientation programme for the new student intake.

Karim said his job was to talk to the cohort about what they could expect at medical school. Mayosi impressed him that day as the two engaged in some light conversation. But it was only 15 years later, when Karim was part of a selection committee for the Nuffield Oxford Medical Fellowship, that the pair met again.

The fellowship enables scholars to pursue postgraduate medicine at the University of Oxford, and Karim recalled that the committee sat in a boardroom in UCT's Bremner Building – the university's administration headquarters.

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“In walks this young man [Mayosi], and I knew by the way in which he interacted that here was somebody who had come of age. He had an academic record second to none, and I told him that. I was so impressed by his work in cardiomyopathy at the time.

“And of course, he got the fellowship. He went to Oxford, and when he came back, [his work] had a huge impact on our country,” Karim said.

### **A passionate and impactful researcher**

During his many interactions with Mayosi over the years, Karim said it was his passion for research, his students and mentees that stood out. One typical example of this passion was that Mayosi was already in his office by 06:30 every morning, meeting with mentees when “most of us are still wondering whether it’s time to wake up”.

“He was passionate about his patients; he was passionate about his research; he was passionate about his students; and he was passionate about his mentees. He deeply believed [in his work] and that’s what gave him impetus.

“That’s what gave him the inner drive to do this,” he said. “Achieving the academic rigour and productivity that he had achieved at his age was truly outstanding. And it was outstanding for any academic – black, white, green – it doesn’t matter. He was at that level of excellence, and you get to be there because you are passionate.”

And with passion comes impact. Karim said Mayosi was deeply committed to making impactful contributions through his work. He aimed to change the world and leave it a better place, which he managed to do in myriad ways.

One such example was Mayosi’s work on tuberculosis (TB) pericarditis, a life-threatening form of TB that causes fluid build-up and compression of the heart. About 40% of patients who develop the condition die within six months.

Karim said Mayosi was determined to better understand the condition and, in doing so, to save lives. In 2014, he developed a ground-breaking, large-scale clinical trial, Investigation of the Management of Pericarditis, and through his research he demonstrated a 50% reduction in constrictive pericarditis with the use of steroids, as well as a 20% decline in hospitalisations. The research paper was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that same year.

“He was trying to redefine [TB pericarditis]. He was trying to save lives. He wanted to have that kind of impact. He believed [he could] and he sought it.”

### **Epitome of excellence**

There was so much more to Mayosi than passion and impact, however. He also embodied excellence and his academic record remains unmatched, Karim pointed out. During his lifetime, Mayosi published about 400 peer-reviewed papers – research papers that subjects an author’s scholarly work to other experts in the same field, and he recorded more than 50 000 citations, which Karim said is about double that which a seasoned academic would have at the pinnacle of their career. About nine of Mayosi’s research papers recorded more than 1 000 citations, and approximately 50 papers recorded more than 100 citations.

Mayosi also received the South African Medical Research Council's platinum medal, an award reserved for exemplary medical scientists in various disciplines in the country, and served on the editorial board of *The Lancet*, one of the world's most prestigious medical journals. Karim described the latter as a "true accomplishment that is hen's teeth". Following his death, Mayosi was named a posthumous member of the United States National Academy of Medicine, an incredible moment that reflected his global influence.

Reflecting on Mayosi's life and legacy, Karim said that, even in death, he remains beyond compare.

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"This is who he was to me: he was passionate, he was impactful, and he was excellent. He never compromised [on excellence]. And as I think about the excellence he stood for, there are no South African scientists that I know of that can match these accomplishments. I think it's going to [take] many years before we can match that," he said.

*Others who contributed to the online leg of the event included Sizwe Nxasana, chairperson of the Bongani Mayosi Foundation; Professor Ntobeko Ntusi, chair and head of UCT's Department of Medicine; and Professor Lionel Green-Thompson, dean of UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences*

[Story by University of Cape Town](#)