

# Laudatio for Professor Willemien du Plessis (BJur LLB LLD MA (Environmental Management))

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An engaged, collegial, and outstanding academic can fulfil a lighthouse function by guiding or giving direction to those at sea. In this context, both the historical and modern functions of lighthouses are relevant, from signalling ports and opportunities to providing a visible warning against hazards for those at sea, such as dangerous waters, rocks, or reefs. I feel very privileged to contribute this *laudatio* in honour of Willemien du Plessis – her being an authentic embodiment of this remarkable academic lighthouse function in South Africa and the surrounding regions.

Much can, and should, be said about an academic career that spans approximately 40 years and celebrates numerous milestones and achievements, including more than 200 accredited journal articles, more than 25 commissioned research reports, more than 100 conference presentations, as well as the successful supervision of dozens of master's dissertations and more than 20 doctoral candidates. However, her original contributions to the discipline of law and impact as legal educator and supervisor are not the focus of this *laudatio* as other colleagues who collaborate with Willemien in her specific fields of expertise will undoubtedly focus on the influence and quality of her scholarship.

I wish to recognise and celebrate the importance of (female) role models in academia and submit that Willemien must rank as one of the best examples of such role models. To my mind a good role model in academia entails being a good educator, researcher and, in general, academic citizen.

We often debate what the notion of academic citizenship entails and what it requires of us as scholars, colleagues, and teachers. Some aspects of academic citizenship, without doubt, include an

excellent work ethic, a generosity of spirit and effective mentorship.

Although some may consider it surprising that, despite her expertise in advanced areas of law and specialised research and publications, Willemien has been teaching large first-year student groups for more than 30 years, she viewed this as a privilege and an opportunity to influence young minds right at the outset of their journey in law.

Willemien has never shied away from taking on more academic and administrative responsibilities than those required by her employer. Her involvement in, and service to, the broader discipline has been remarkable. This involvement ranges from the Environmental Law Association, National Research Foundation, ASSAf, and the Law Reform Commission to serving as member/chair of review committees of several other national and international Faculties of Law and their programmes.

As mentor, Willemien walked alongside several colleagues and guided those individuals on what is possible to do, with the necessary courage and inspiration, rather than walking ahead and telling us how she did it. It is not often that a person can effectively fulfil this role to a wide array of people, from the first-year student arriving on campus from a rural school and with severe disabilities, to the ambitious postgraduate student wishing to enter academia, to the young lecturer pursuing career progression, and even to a first-time dean wishing to make a positive contribution in a new environment.

The role and expectations of academics have changed significantly over the last decades, and it is inspiring to have a colleague who does not only remain relevant but who sets the tone for forward-looking research and methodologies. Curiosity had much to do with Willemien's collaborative and rich academic journey; her curiosity and the desire for new experiences, in Oscar Wilde's words, was not a simple but rather a complex passion.

One must also recognise that fulfilling a lighthouse function and withstanding the unavoidable storms over a long period of time while guiding others, requires one to be resilient and deep-rooted. Willemien's innovation, energy, and keen intellect have provided guidance to countless colleagues and students to rise above the storm and find solutions to problems. I am confident that she will continue to fulfil this role regardless of any formal retirement. Like so many others, I want to say that it is remarkable what you can accomplish if you do

not care who gets the credit and this is why Willemien du Plessis has achieved so much. She doesn't easily accept compliments and prefers to emit the circle of light wide and away from herself, but she deserves recognition and appreciation. I am therefore excited and grateful for this *liber amicorum*, which she will have to gracefully accept.

With this *liber amicorum* we recognise and celebrate the life and career of our trusted and valued friend and colleague, Willemien du Plessis. Her legacy as inspiring and reassuring colleague and mentor will continue to illuminate the way for others to follow.

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