

A Letter to my Colleague and Friend: Willemien du Plessis

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Dear Willemien,

I have probably written you ten thousand or more emails and a dozen or so birthday and thank you cards in the past two decades. This time round, I am writing you a letter because 2023 not only marks the 20th year of us knowing each other, it is also the year of your inevitable retirement.

Those who know you well, would agree that you usually know *everything* (although we won't always admit it, of course). I therefore thought to spend a few words on pointing out things I think you don't know, or appreciate for what they really mean:

You are a distinctly influential academic citizen

The contributions in this special issue of PER all attest, in one way or the other, to how you have over the years systematically instilled and communicated legal knowledge across a range of subject fields that are not only important for legal development but also for creating and maintaining a livable, peaceful and just South Africa. As a scholar, your contribution to the fields of environmental law and governance, energy law, legal history, land rights, access to information, indigenous law, and legal pluralism is evident in the pages of the contributions to this special issue. Your unsaturable desire to figure out details, and engage with critical legal analysis, alternative research methodologies and cross-disciplinary inquiries captured in dozens of national and international journal articles, books, book chapters and conference presentations have not only shaped knowledge in profound ways but have also shaped the people and institutions tasked to do something constructive with it.

However, you have done so much more than merely writing and communicating about law. Over the years you have unselfishly served academia in many other ways: you never became too busy or important to lecture to hundreds of first-

year students; you have served on and boldly engaged various faculty and university bodies; you have done work for the South African Law Reform Commission and assisted the three spheres of government through dedicated projects; you have spent many years serving the National Research Foundation of South Africa, the Academy of Science, and the IUCN Academy of Environmental Law; you have done hundreds of peer reviews and programme evaluations; you have developed new teaching modules and courses; written study guides; organised national and international workshops and conferences too many to mention; and written countless project funding applications, reports and reference and promotion letters. You have done so much during your career to achieve a more inclusive and humane academic environment and to help bring about a transformed and transformative university sector. In essence, you have become the hallmark – an almost unattainable standard – of what academic citizenship is or *should be* about. In your modest manner you have shown me and others over the years what it means to belong to something, and how to meaningfully interact and collaborate in the academic community. From you we have learned that being an academic is a fulfilling privilege as well as a massive responsibility.

You are an inter-generational mentor like no other

If there is one characteristic that people will always remember you for, it is your incredible ability to mentor and help steer professional development trajectories. In addition to all the things I have mentioned above, you have supervised a staggering number of masters and doctoral students over the course of your career. I know of many instances where you also had to help save a hopeless research attempt where a postgraduate student and his or her supervisor simply could no longer manage on their own. Very few theses that have been completed at the North-West University's Faculty of Law, do not explicitly mention your meaningful contribution.

However, you did not mentor students only. You have mentored – uplifted – so many colleagues and emerging academics (at the NWU and elsewhere), as well as young people entering legal practice. Many of your masters and doctoral students went on to become academics in their own right – in South Africa and abroad. Your legacy lies in the fact that most of those academics subsequently climbed the ladder to further success and are carrying forward the light you graciously passed on to them. In fact, I am curious to know exactly how many academics that you "helped to raise" have had their students eventually become academics too. There must be many! I am always amazed by your insight into the human psyche and your ability to work miracles with people whom others have given up on a long

time ago. Your often inexplicable belief in the abilities of people is remarkable. You need to know that the impact of years and years of invaluable mentorship and professional advice – mostly through the example you have set – will live on for decades to come. We have learned from you how futures can be changed by sharing one's wisdom, insight and, most importantly, one's time.

You have been a source of consistency that cannot be replaced

We live in an era of constant change and adjustment but over the years you have become an incredible source of consistency in various academic and other institutions. I firmly believe that the NWU Faculty of Law is indebted to *you* for most of what it is today – even though you always shied away from any such recognition or from becoming Dean, for example. Your institutional memory and insights into the ebb and flow of processes, rules, requirements, historic decisions, policies and plans, fair practices, and treating colleagues with kindness, are irreplaceable, and will be sorely missed, also by the Environmental Law Association of South Africa that you helped to establish and tirelessly served for decades.

I appreciate you for being a wonderful friend

If I were to write down all the ways in which you influenced my own academic journey and helped determine the course of my career, this letter would become as long as the doctoral thesis I completed under your supervision. I want you to know that I am incredibly thankful for the many hours with you and Johan under "the lapa" in Potchefstroom when we started to conceptualise my doctoral thesis in 2005/2006, for the many years of random as well as strategic academic conversations, and the mutual sharing of ideas and brainstorming sessions over "Jonge Akker" and "Food Studio" coffees. Thank you for having been instrumental in all of my academic positions and achievements (and that of many of *my* students) during the past 18 years. I hope you know that I am the academic I am, because of you.

You are an exceptional friend, Willemien. When all the talk about academic life and one's career starts to fade and lose its appeal, we'll have other things to talk about. And that is what I am most grateful for: having you as my friend. Thank you for being such a fun travel companion (may we never forget the trips to China, Brazil, the USA, our road-trips in Australia and Mexico, the amazing experiences in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Swaziland and the many wonderful periods we spent together in Europe and every single province in South Africa). Thank you for all the beautiful flowers you so often gifted me with over the years and the food at my door when

contagious illnesses struck. Thank you for showering my children with books and attention. Thank you for your slightly twisted sense of humour (and your sometimes hilarious conspiracy theories – some of which might just turn out to be true after all), your memory, and your ability to make connections, the gift you have of sensing when everything is not really A-okay, and for being a constant reminder that after all is said and done, how we make people *feel* is the most important thing.

May the next phase in your life be blessed in many, many ways. You deserve nothing less.

Your colleague and friend,

Anél du Plessis

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