

Out with the old and in with the new

Tom Lee had the honour of interviewing Stellenbosch University's newly elected Chancellor. Ex-Justice Edwin Cameron has quite an extraordinary story to share to us. Cameron speaks about the discriminative stigmas, opportunities and facing prejudice.

Stellenbosch University's (SU) Electoral College has elected Ex-Justice Edwin Cameron as the institution's fifteenth Chancellor.

The announcement came on 25 September, a month after Justice Cameron had announced his retirement. Cameron, who has served as a member of the judiciary for 25 years, was revered as one of the top judges in South African judicial history.

An alumnus of Pretoria Boys High School, Cameron went on to navigate the corridors and lecture halls of Stellenbosch University as a student. Here he worked hard at obtaining a BA (Law) degree, whilst juggling the responsibility of being the Prim of Wilgenhof Men's Residence.

Cameron certainly succeeded at being a student and bagged the BA (Law) and an Honours degree in Latin, receiving cum laude for both. He received a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University. Cameron packed his bags, seized the opportunity with both hands and went on to earn his BA in Jurisprudence and a Bachelor of Civil Law at Oxford. He completed his LLB at the University of South Africa later in his career. And so, the foundations were laid for Cameron's career as a legal professional and academic. His extensive knowledge and experience served him well when he began his judicial career as a judicial officer in the High Court, the Supreme Court of Appeal and the Constitutional Court.

The ex-Justice spent close to ten years on the bench as a Constitutional Court judge. He was actively involved in various notable cases, including *The Citizen v McBride*, which dealt with fair comment in terms of the right to freedom of speech, *Le Roux v Dey*, which dealt with defamation in terms of Human Dignity and most recently, *Democratic Alliance v African National Congress*, a ruling that was lauded as a "victory for freedom of speech". His path as a judicial officer was certainly riddled with obstacles and the sort of challenges every judge must face, but Cameron began his career in a position faced by no other civil servant at the time.

The ex-justice opened up about his homosexuality and positive HIV status becoming one of the first public officials to do so. "After three years of utter solitude, remaining silent while feelings of shame and fear churned inside, in 1990 I had managed to start speaking with my closest relatives, friends and colleagues about my HIV," said Cameron. Cameron utilised his status as a gay and HIV positive male and became part of numerous gay rights and HIV/AIDS movements that were aimed at breaking down the stigmas sur-



TAKE A CHANCE Edwin Cameron, SU's newly elected Chancellor is planning on impacting the university for the better. Photo: Supplied

rounding homosexuals and those affected by HIV/AIDS.

He was part of the gay pride parade in South Africa in 1990 and was instrumental in the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the Constitutional Court.

He also played a part in the creation of the Yogyakarta Principles, a document outlining human rights in the areas of gender identity and sexual orientation, and was involved in an initiative at the University of the Witwatersrand called the Society for Homosexuals, which raised awareness for the rights of gay students.

The fight against HIV/AIDS is an ongoing one, and it is a fight in which Cameron has been continuously involved. He has been living with HIV for two and a half decades and has been a part of projects such as the Charter of rights on AIDs and HIV as well as the AIDS consortium, both of which strive to fight HIV and AIDS and the stigmas and issues attached to the virus. "I reflected all the millennia of the dumb homophobia and embraced it inside.

It was a pitiful way to live. When I started human rights law, I was absolutely determined that I would never again apologise for being gay, so I came out. Soon after that I became infected with HIV and discovered that in 1986," Cameron says. Chief Justice Mogoeng recently commended Cameron for being a loyal servant

to the Republic of South Africa and for his humility in bettering the community around him.

The Chief Justice gave some insight into the ex-Justice's character. "Edwin, in his spare time makes it his business to share himself and his experiences with many others out there who don't have the benefit of the information that he has. This information can liberate them from the prejudices that have kept them in a position of disadvantage for a long time," Mogoeng said. Mogoeng honoured Cameron for his involvement in human rights activism. "A brave and bold man. When HIV attracted stigma, he stood up and declared openly that he was HIV positive. He knew the attitude of South Africans at the time. He could afford the ARVS and could like many of us mind his business and care less about others, but not Edwin Cameron.

"His love for the multitudes of South Africans could not allow him to shut up, so for the sake of the suffering masses he not only spoke but acted and moved around and mobilized the support.

"Thanks to him, the lives of many South Africans and many people across the globe have been saved. He is, therefore, the kind of man to be honoured at national level."

The job of the chancellor may mainly be a ceremonial and figurehead position, but Cameron is still willing and able to play an active role in advising the various

programs that have been set up in response to the ongoing issues and stigmas at Stellenbosch University.

According to Cameron, stigmas can be eradicated by creating opportunities for people to speak out and confront the stigma affecting them. "You know, I think that stigma needs to be confronted in whatever form it takes, and certainly, I can try to do exactly that.

I cannot personally confront racial stigma but can certainly confront the LGBTQIA stigma and stigma against people living with HIV and AIDS. The part of the answer lies with those who are stigmatized themselves, who must be given the agency and opportunity to talk out about the stigma," Cameron said.

Cameron has some valuable insights on the brain drain currently affecting Stellenbosch students and South Africans in general. He believes that young South Africans have far more opportunities than they know and should consider the positive aspects of the country when making decisions on immigration. "There are opportunities here. South Africa is an extraordinarily beautiful country and it is an interesting country.

"When you make comparisons, which ought to be to other middle-income countries such as Turkey, Russia, Argentina, India, we are not doing badly at all. I don't think we should be complacent.

"I do think South Africa offers fantastic opportunities to people

with talent and dedication and I think our unique racial history offers a role to young Afrikaans people, young white people, and young black and brown South Africans." Cameron says the country at this very point in time needs certain traits to be instilled by Stellenbosch University to lead South Africa in the right direction going into the future.

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"The university needs inclusivity, academic excellence, a heightened research output.

It needs to generate new ideas in the sciences, in the agricultural areas, and racial reconciliation, in all those areas together." For those young students and graduates who are trying to secure their futures and make a difference in South Africa, Cameron recommends dedication and hard work. "I think there is a huge contribution to make to our country and I think the most important thing is hard work and dedication.

"Whether you are in law, accounting or public administration, the key ingredient is hard work and dedication in all that you do."