# Neil Aggett Naming Ceremony Welcome

**Dr Saleem Badat**

**Vice Chancellor, Rhodes University**

**4 April 2104**

The MEC for Economic Development, Environmental Affairs and Tourism Mr Mcebisi Jonas
Ms Jill Burger, sister of Neil Aggett and the wider Aggett family
Dr Beverley Naidoo and Mr Nanda Naidoo
Dr Liz Floyd of the Gauteng Department of Health
Mr Brian Sandberg of the Neil Aggett Support Group
Comrades, friends and colleagues of Neil Aggett
Speakers and participants in the activities of the past two days
Prof van Niekerk, the Director of the Institute for Social and Economic Research
Dr John Reynolds, Head of the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit
Officials of the Eastern Cape Department of Economic Development, Environmental Affairs and Tourism
Dignitaries, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to Rhodes University and to this event to inaugurate the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit and the Neil Aggett House in honour Dr Neil Hudson Aggett.

Naming, you will appreciate, is more than simply attaching a name to a building. It is an embodiment and reflection of values, ethical commitments and an important component of institutional culture.

What things are named, to honour whom, to remember whom, in what language and through what processes really matter. So of course do the icons – the symbols, emblems, logos, slogans, portraits and photographs - that are associated with an institution.

With respect to the values and identity of Rhodes University, it is important to recall that in September 2008 the University issued a public declaration in which we openly and publicly acknowledged the shameful and regrettable institutional actions on our part during the apartheid period.

This was on the occasion of another naming ceremony – that of the naming of the Student Union building the Bantu Stephen Biko Building. The public acknowledgement was a milestone in the overall programme of the transformation, development, modernisation and remaking of Rhodes.

Our open and public *acknowledgement of* shameful and regrettable institutional actions during the apartheid period, and our unreserved *apology* to all those who were wronged, harmed and hurt by our past failings and actions was undertaken to bring uncomfortable truths into the open, and draw a line on a particular past.

We did so as an act of 'the struggle of memory against forgetting,' as an expression of our critical 'engagement with where we' were then and of our determination to continue shaping a new future.

The critique of past injustices freed us to conceive how we could avoid repeating such tragedies. It demonstrated our desire to promote reconciliation and healing within ourselves and our society, to embrace new values and ways of being and acting, and to reinvent, remake and renew our University.

This naming ceremony is one of various activities through which we as a University seek to transcend our past and continue with our remaking and renewal as a small but outstanding African university.

There is no need here to say anything about the example, character and qualities of Neil Aggett. This was done beautifully by Beverley Naidoo on Wednesday evening and is done more fully in her book.

The establishment of the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit brings with it the responsibility to reflect critically on issues of labour, worker rights, human rights and social justice in a society characterised by acute inequalities and injustices.

I hope that we will do so imaginatively and rigorously, and in a way that is freed from the current orthodoxies that imprison our intellects, stifle our thoughts, blind our visions, and constrain our actions.

It is my hope that the Rhodes annual lecture in memory of Neil Aggett will be occasions on which we dedicate ourselves to boldly confront, erode and eliminate the different kinds and forms of injustices that pervade and blight our society and cause suffering for millions of our fellow people.

Both the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit and the annual lecture must hold out an intellectual, ethical and social vision of a society based on the values of human dignity, equality, social equity, non-sexism and non-racialism, human rights, and economic and social rights and freedoms for all people.

Neil Aggett personified good. Our challenge as a University is to cultivate new generations of intellectuals and professionals who do not only possess knowledge and expertise but are also good and deeply sensitive to the needs of our people and society.

It is young men and women who embody good that South Africa needs to counter our society becoming mired any further in greed, crass materialism and unbridled accumulation alongside desperate daily attempts at simply survival.

The stained glass window in this Kingswood chapel donated by the Aggett family in Neil's memory contains the quote: 'Did not my heart grieve for the poor'. Aggett did not only grieve in the face of the suffering, poverty and injustice that he witnessed all around him; he made a profound social commitment to use his expertise to advance the rights of the poor and joined hands with others to build a society in which there could be justice for all.

The text at Agget's funeral in 1982 was 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'. This was very appropriate, as Aggett had through his hard work breathed life into the struggling Food and Canning Workers Union Transvaal branch and sought resurrect it into a powerful instrument of workers rights and power. Through this, he played an integral part in the overall revival of the mass democratic movement in South Africa.

The 'Neil Aggett choice' as Minister Rob Davies has noted was not to 'carve out a quiet and prosperous life for himself in private medical practice, enjoying the comforts and privileges that were available then to white professionals'. Instead, he *educated* himself to become an enlightened, ethical, critical, creative and compassionate human.

Inspired by our motto, 'Truth, Virtue and Strength', we have to work to ensure that the students of this University and youth and people generally pursue the *truth* that derives from knowledge, understanding and reason.

That they embrace the *virtues* of respect for human dignity and compassion and possess the courage and strength to fight injustice wherever they find it.

And that they always remember that only when *all* people possess the political, social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives, can we claim to live in a just and humane society and can we all be truly free.

That was the 'Neil Aggett choice', and it is a choice that we today honour and remember as part of the 'struggle of memory against forgetting'. It is a choice that should inspire us all.