In the footsteps of Jakes Gerwel

Jakes Gerwel made an impression on everyone who met him. He read between the lines, made a difference to the South African landscape, and left an impressive legacy.

Theo Kemp

On 1 August this year I walked into my new office in the Mandela Rhodes building in the city centre of Cape Town as the first executive director of the Jakes Gerwel Foundation. The Foundation seeks to plough back into the community in memory of this son of the platteland from Kommadagga in the Eastern Cape. He achieved great things as, among others, the rector of the University of the Western Cape, and later as director-general alongside the first democratically elected president of the new South Africa, Nelson Mandela.

The Foundation aims to advance literature, give the voiceless a voice, and support children with educational programmes. To bring hope precisely where hopelessness is overwhelming. The focus of the Foundation stretches as widely as the multifaceted and interwoven involvement of Jakes Gerwel himself in the multi-layered South African sociopolitical landscape.

There is an urgency to bring about social change through education, welfare, arts and culture, and sport. But the first step is literature. It is his love for books and especially Afrikaans literature that characterised Jakes’s early years as an Afrikaans teacher and later as a lecturer, through to his years in government.

I never had the privilege of meeting this influential man. With his wild hair and unflinching, almost stern gaze, he watches me from a print on my office wall, where he stands next to a smiling Madiba. Armed with my yellowing notebook and pen, I went to find out who this man was; nobody has a harsh word.

Jakes’s father regarded education as extremely important and in 1941 he built a school on the farm where he was a foreman. Jakes and his 10 siblings attended the school; it gave hundreds of rural children the opportunity to achieve an education.

Remembering a birthday party at his home in Belhar, just outside Cape Town, Antjie Krog, poet, and friend of Jakes for many years, says, “Jakes never wanted to be at the centre of anything. He could stand to one side and notice everything and enjoy. If there is one person who could read between everyone’s lines, whether you were black or white, then it was Jakes.”

Hein Willemse, academic and literator, concurred with Antjie regarding this timidity in his tribute after Jakes’s sudden death on 28 November 2012: “Jakes was not a man of great gestures. He was an introvert who, nonetheless, often found himself on the public stage. In all the years that I knew him, I always got the feeling that he suffered public life and didn’t adapt to it completely. Inciting, boisterous or demagogic are not characteristics one would accord him. Humble, honest, long-suffering and unselfish are.”

Antjie tells of Jakes’s love for NP van Wyk Louw’s poetry, which they translated together; his excitement about the arts, and one of the last moments, when they laughed together at the lyrics of Andries Bezuidenhout’s Die laaste brandwag.

Hein Gerwel, Jakes’s son, says his father was everything but as serious as he often appeared to others. “He was a great joker and gave everyone and everything a nickname. And he loved his tipple, and of course his cricket,” Hein laughs, and then adds: “But my father had the gift of making everyone feel as if he was their very best friend.”

Marlene leRoux, executive head of the Artscape theatre in Cape Town, also remembers Jakes as a man full of jokes, with a big heart and a love for the arts. “He would call me late at night from Australia to say he couldn’t wait to go to the Opera House.”

Niel le Roux, previous head of the Suidoosterfees, remembers
Jakes as an art lover whose dream of establishing a festival known for its nonracialism and transparency came true.

"No matter what anyone tells you," warns Marlene, "Jakes had a good laugh at all those who wanted to make him so important. He wasn't a little god and never wanted to be."

His life spoke precisely of simplicity and humility. In a documentary before his death, I noticed that Jakes said his lesson to his children and grandchildren would be to always live with mindfulness and tolerance. During all my conversations these words echo and I write them in my notebook time and again.

Pam Barron, his former personal assistant, agrees: "Prof was a very humble person. He would dress comfortably and plainly, and if I organised a toasted sandwich or a cup of soup for him at lunchtime, he was at his happiest. This wasn't a man for pretence; he cared for everyone. He trusted people – perhaps too much at times."

Annari van der Merwe, former publisher and friend, shares her first meeting with Jakes in the Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town during the height of apartheid. An 'international' hotel, it was one of the few places where people of different races could meet. Jakes's good friend Daantjie Saayman thought Jakes and Annari should be introduced. It was the beginning of a long friendship and shared love for Somerset East in the Eastern Cape where Annari's mother and two sisters lived. Jakes's house still stands in Paulet Street in the little town, near the Walter Battiss Museum. I followed the trail there to visit the house, which the Foundation plans to convert into a writers' home, and I met farmers and gardeners, cleaners and entrepreneurs – all of their lives touched by Jakes.

"Jakes's gift was that he could always imagine himself in the other person's position," Annari recalls. That's why he was loved by all and never intimidated people.

When asked what he regards as his greatest legacy, Steward answers without hesitation: "He made a great contribution to changing and broadening the Afrikaans sphere of thought and intellectual climate radically. By taking an unwavering stance for non-racialism and fearlessly denouncing undemocratic practices, he freed Afrikaans and also Afrikaners. He had few equals in debate and through his disciplined action he set an example for many."

The life counsel that Steward learned from Jakes and which he still wishes to impart to his students to this day, is that there is no shortcut to intellectual maturity. It takes hours of meticulous work. "Once he had us read a paragraph from Frederic Jameson's Marxism and Form, word for word so that we could grasp its full meaning. He accepted no excuses for laziness and negligence."

As in the case of Steward, Hein Willemse also got to know Jakes at the University of the Western Cape. "We were young students there in the mid-70s, the days of rebellion and struggle. One of our student magazines came to the attention of the authorities when someone complained about the political and blasphemous nature of our writing. And Jakes had to write a confidential report on their 'literary value' in order to prevent our student association's funds being cut off. By rights the administration should have closed down the association for the poor quality of our poetry, but Jakes displayed all his virtuosity and proved that there was literary merit at the bottom of all the Sturm und Drang."
It was the beginning of a long friendship between Hein and Jakes. "After that we spoke regularly, and at his insistence we third years had a farewell party at his home, where Gerhard Botha wanted to propose a toast towards the end of the evening: ‘Come, let’s drink to Mr Gerwel!’ When he heard there was no more drink left, Gerard about-turned quickly with: ‘Come let’s think to Mr Gerwel!’"

“He was rather a dry undergraduate lecturer, not a performer, but in our postgraduate classes, where dialogue and wrestling with ideas mattered, he was a good discussion leader,” Hein remembers.

“The way he ran his left hand over his face and stroked his goatee, was always an indication of further questioning or intensified investigation of a certain matter. I remember how, during an honours class, he posed probing questions in reaction to a glowing comment on Marxism, which practically undermined its basis and had him sounding like a pink liberal, and all the while publicly he was a recognised expert of literary and Western Marxism. I remember the class when – I was a young lecturer by then – he opened a departmental meeting with a triumphant cry, with reference to François Mitterand’s first presidential victory: ‘The socialists have won!’"

Jakes’s dissertation, which was later published in book form, *Literatuur en apartheid*, was the first study to demonstrate that Afrikaans novels perpetuated early 20th-century stereotypes of coloured people and how Afrikaans literature contributed to the creation and backing up of apartheid.

“He was an academic through and through, and more than once he confessed to me that he missed the analytical wrestling with a literary text and the reading of literature in his later busy administrative life. Some of his novels often contained extensive pencil notes and references. I remember that he wrote a note with an exclamation mark in his copy, alongside the opening paragraph of André P Brink’s *Genugte van reën*, in which he described gnats on the main character’s front windscreen: ‘Oh dear, André, it’s so predictable!’” Hein laughs.

Another anecdote Hein recalls is the day Jakes invited him to attend the launch of a new wine at Boschendal with Jan Rabie, Marjorie Wallace and Richard Rive. On their way there they talked about a novel by Dostoyevski that he was re-reading and how we could work JM Coetzee’s ‘latest novel’, *The Life and Times of Michael K*, into our comparative literature course. Years later, during a Naspers management visit to Moscow, Hein took a photograph of him alongside the Dostoyevski statue in front of the Lenin Library and reminded him of his Dostoyevski quote that day, that ‘the second half of a person’s life only consists of the habits he built up in the first part’. Hein laughed and said he would also remember that day for something else, namely that Jan refused outright to spit the ‘good wine’ into the spittoon, and they had seen him and Marjorie off later that evening with sinking hearts. He and Jakes feared that in his condition, after half a day’s wine tasting, Jan wouldn’t be able to manoeuvre the little green Morris over the mountains and valleys from Priel to Onrus without misfortune. Hein believes Jakes could have produced so much more as a literator, but university affairs and the country’s administration were calling.

“I remember that during his first few years as dean, he tried to take off one day a week for research, and we would conduct informative discussions about literature and politics. But then his door at the university started to remain locked, and his office empty. The demands of administration began to take over and he steered his path to the portals of Nelson Mandela’s new South Africa.”

Jakes wasn’t a bellowing leader – everyone agrees. He led by his own example and his tolerance, and with his inborn humility he placed dialogue and persuasion above all. He displayed that skill in all other spheres of life too – politics, diplomacy, and in the business world.

As I drive home from my office in the afternoons, I hear references again and again to Jakes Gerwel Drive where heavy traffic and accidents make the news. And then I think of the words of Albie Sachs who wrote that when he drives here, he thinks of the great contradiction of Jakes’s life: on the one hand he wanted to be as inclusive as possible and provide a home at the University of the Western Cape for students who couldn’t speak Afrikaans. On the other hand, it was his absolute passion to enrich Afrikaans – especially in the platteland.

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Woodborne will perform *Kommandoagga*, and a panel discussion will take place with Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Amy Jephta and Demaine Solomons. This discourse will be led by radio announcer, Martelize Brink. Brian Figaji, chairperson of the Foundation, will MC the event.

Contact Theo Kemp for more information about the Jakes Gerwel Foundation at *theo@jgf.org.za* or visit *jgf.org.za*.