

Youth Day: We have to take a stand for the future

William Sezoe*

Early in May this year, I met the dynamic, award-winning and iconic poet, Dr Dianna Ferrus, who was recently recognised with an honorary doctorate by Stellenbosch University (SU). While we stood and chatted, I asked her why she thought history was important:

“The past is also the present and even the future,” Ferrus told me.

I have to confess, I did not immediately reflect on Ferrus’ words. But here where we celebrate Youth Day and Youth Month today, I am thinking specifically about these words.

16 June 1976: a very important day in the history of South Africa, where young people decided to rise up. To rise up against a regime that was discriminatory against those who were not white enough. A regime that shamelessly violated the rights of black people. A regime that had decided on behalf of others.

These approximately 20 000 young people, as recorded in the history books, decided they had had enough of a regime that oppressed them. Enough of a regime that dictated to them what they could and could not become in life: a regime that said who were allowed to become doctors and who weren’t. A regime that said who could become farm workers and who couldn’t.

This drove these young people to take a stand. To fight for equality and justice, especially in terms of education. The type of education as described in the words of Nelson Mandela:

“It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation.”

We commemorate the youth of 1976 who stood fearlessly, chest-to-chest against the Apartheid police. Their lives were at stake for the freedom of us all. A very expensive price was paid by these young people, and it was a price paid with blood. Blood of young people such as Hector Petersen and many more.

In closing ...

Nobody is going to take us seriously if we do not decide now to take a stand. We cannot allow our country to continue to muddle along as it currently is doing.

As in the words of Ferrus, the past is also the present tense; if the youth of 1976 had not taken a stand, we would not now have equal and fair education for all. And this is how it will remain in the future, thanks to the sacrifices in 1976.

What are we willing to sacrifice today for the sake of the future of ourselves, the generations yet to come and the future of our country?