

Varsity walks the road with Heidedal schools

Russel Botman

ON October 8, 2012, Stellenbosch University (SU)'s centre for interactive telematic learning in Heidedal, Bloemfontein, was officially inaugurated.

This entails the provisioning of extra lessons in key subjects to Grade 11 and 12 learners via satellite.

The programme is aimed at providing support to learners, teachers and schools.

South Africa's education system is being faced by many challenges, and satellite technology provides some handy solutions.

The broadcasts to Heidedal started in July and we are expecting them to have a positive influence on examination results in the area at the end of the year.

In the Western Cape, where the programme has been running for the past three years, the average improvement in the matric pass rate of participating schools last year was 10.9 percent.

At 20 of the 145 schools facing the biggest challenges the improvement was 50 percent or more.

The programme is the initiative of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), with SU providing the technology.

Broadcasts are done from studios at SU's division of telematic services, and interaction takes place with learners via cell-phones and the internet.

The WCED uses top teachers to present the extra lessons in mathematics, physical sciences, accounting, life sciences, English, Afrikaans and Geography via the system.

The participating schools have all been equipped with a satellite dish and special decoder to receive the transmissions.

Broadcasts take place on designated weekday afternoons and on Sundays.

Learners gather in a classroom at their school specifically equipped for this purpose.

The programme has this year been extended to 69 schools in the Northern Cape, at the request of the province's education department.

And now it has also been extended to three schools in the Free State — Dr Blok, Heatherdale and Petunia Senior Secondary Schools, at their request.

I am very pleased that we are able to be of assistance to the community of Heidedal in this way because I am myself an "Old Blok" (an alumnus of the Dr Blok school).

I was born in Heidedal in 1953 to Karel and Mavis Botman.

When I went to Sub A (Grade 1), my father went back to Dr Blok with me — to complete his last two so that he could go to university.

He had a tough time as a child and had to leave school at the end of Standard 8 (Grade 10).

He joined the church as a lay preacher and in Heidedal he met my mother.

When I was born, he decided to go to university and that's why he went back to school — with his son!

My father realised his dream.

When I went to Standard 1 (Grade 3), he went to the University of the Western Cape.

For the six years that my father studied theology, my mother was a pillar of strength to my siblings and I.

That is why I can to this day identify with single-parent households — because we were so reliant on our mother's support.

After matric, I followed in my father's footsteps — as did my brother.

Both of us got degrees in theology, just like our father.

My sisters went into education.

We have our parents to thank for realising that there is nothing more precious than knowledge.

There is nothing more precious than knowledge — not shiny cars and big houses, but knowledge.

It is important to mention that the telematic programme for schools is a support service.

It is not meant to replace teachers. It provides support at three levels — schools and teachers, parents, as well as enabling learners to build their own future.

We are expecting that many more Heidedal learners will go to university.

It does not matter which uni-



PROFESSOR Russel Botman

versity, as long as they study further.

Those who do not get access to university must go to college or get another form of post-schooling education.

When one is confronted with challenges in the schooling system, the question is what you are going to do about it.

We all have a responsibility neither to sit back nor to point the finger at others, but to get up and make a tangible difference.

This is exactly what the Dr Blok, Petunia and Heatherdale schools are doing with their holiday schools and matric camps;

and now also by joining this programme of interactive satellite broadcasts.

Just like Karel Botman took his son's hand all those years ago and went to school with him, so Stellenbosch University gladly walks the road with schools — in Heidedal and elsewhere.

May we in this way jointly help the youth of today to expand their horizons and reach new heights.

• Professor Russel Botman is the rector and vice-chancellor of Stellenbosch University.