

**Address by the Deputy Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development,
the Hon JH Jeffery, MP
at a symposium in memory of Prof Christof Heyns,
hosted by the University of Pretoria,
28 April 2021**

Programme Directors, Prof Schoeman and Ms Noko,
Members of the Heyns Family,
The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms Michelle
Bachelet,
Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Dr Navi Pillay,
Retired Judge of the Constitutional Court, Justice Albie Sachs,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen, friends

I was extremely honoured to receive the invitation from Prof Kupe to speak at this symposium in honour of Christof – someone for whom I have the highest regard professionally, but also someone who, on a personal level, I consider a friend.

Christof was one of those unique and rare human beings who were just as highly respected in a professional sense, as much as being equally highly regarded for the person they are.

He was a master at his craft, a pioneer and an international leader in his field and, as a person, a man of enormous integrity, warm and engaging, with no airs and graces about him and with the biggest heart.

From the very early days of his career, Christof was committed to human rights and to bringing about a non-racial South Africa for all.

Together with Johan van der Westhuizen, they established the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria in the mid-1980s, during the very darkest days of apartheid rule.

Christof was deeply committed to social justice.

A former Dean of the Faculty of Law, Christof went on to become the Co-Director at the Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa which, under his leadership, has become a centre of excellence for legal research and legal reform in Africa.

In 2010 he was appointed as the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions and thereafter as one of the 18 members of the UN Human Rights Committee. As recently as last year, he played a leading role in the Committee's new General Comment (General Comment 37 on Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) on the right of peaceful assembly and Christof served as the Committee's rapporteur responsible for its preparation.

In a podcast from July last year with the World Justice Project, he talks about growing up in South Africa and studying here.

He speaks about the state of emergency at the height of apartheid and about our history – a history which he says, and I quote, "*a history I was not taught in a white school*" and why he did his doctorate on the topic of civil disobedience.

For many of us, whenever we hear the words "human wrongs to human rights" we do and will, inevitably, continue to always think of Christof. For if ever there was an embodiment of a life committed to those words, it was Christof's.

And, at this time, as we celebrate his life and his unwavering contributions to human rights and to the rule of law, it is an opportune time for all of us to reflect on whether or not, across the world, the pendulum is not perhaps moving more towards human wrongs rather than human rights?

As a country, are we more committed to the rule of law today than, let's say, a decade or two ago? Are we more xenophobic or homophobic today than we were in 1994?

In a world where the equal enjoyment of human rights for all is possible to achieve, why are so many people across the world still being denied their most basic of rights? Is the world as committed to international human rights and the UN Treaty system as it was post-World War 2? And if the answer to that question is no, then how do we fix that?

These are not easy questions to answer, but if we are to truly honour the legacy of legal giants such as Christof was, we have to grapple with these questions and re-commit ourselves daily to the fulfilment of human rights for all.

I worked closely with Christof as he played a leading role in the National Schools Moot Court Competition - something which I know was very close to his heart. He even thought that almost every problem could be solved by a moot! He was brilliant at mentoring and guiding some of our current legal academics, many of whom are here with this morning, as well as some of the upcoming leading legal minds of tomorrow.

I know that Christof liked to play the guitar and I know that he liked the music of Valiant Swart. (For our international participants, Valiant Swart is an Afrikaans singer and composer.)

He wrote a song, it's in Afrikaans and is called "Sonvanger", which means "suncatcher" – those small pieces of glass which if you hang them up and they catch the smallest bit of light are capable of reflecting the most beautiful array of colours and light.

In the song, the singer asks the suncatcher to go and fetch the sun to drive away the wind and the rain.

A few of the lines, in Afrikaans, read as follows en ek vra vooraf omverskoning vir my Engelse aksent:

"Kyk of jy vir my die son kan kry

Daar's 'n huisie in my hart waar die son kan bly

Kyk of jy vir my die son kan steel

Daar's 'n plekkie in the tuin waar die son kan speel.

Bring 'n bietjie lig

Vir die draaie op my pad

En 'n handjie vol strale

Vir die donker in my hart"

Christof was a suncatcher – whether in the darkness of a world deprived of human rights, or to shine the light and focus our attention on the injustices around us or just to illuminate whatever project he was working on at the time.

To the Heyns family – Christof's wife, Fearika, his son, Adam, his two daughters, Willemien and Renee, his grandson Isak and also to his mother, Renee – you are all in our thoughts. Also to his colleagues and his students, our deepest condolences go out to you all.

When one loses a loved one, one learns that grief is not linear. Some days may be easier than others and some days may be extremely hard. May the legacy and the memories of Christof give you comfort and peace and may the suncatcher send you light on dark days.

A great tree has fallen. May his soul rest in peace and may his legacy live on.

I thank you.