

In Memoriam
Judge Neels Claassen
16 June 1945 to 12 June 2021

Where can one find the words that do justice to this giant of a man, with whom we had the pleasure and privilege of sharing a part of our lives? I do not know – yet have been honoured by a request from SAMLA to write about my best friend and mentor. I do so willingly, as recalling his love, companionship and laughter fills me with joy.

I met Judge Neels Claassen shortly after his retirement, towards the end of 2014. It took one discussion over lunch, with Jurie Wessels SC and myself, to recruit the retired judge as a member and director of the South African Medico-Legal Society (SAMLS). Judge Neels fell hook, line and sinker for SAMLS, its goals and its MOI. Shortly thereafter, at the AGM, he was unanimously elected as chairperson of SAMLS.

In the 5 years that Judge Neels served as chairperson, he transformed and expanded SAMLS, which under his stewardship became the South African Medico-Legal Association (SAMLA), into a widely respected and influential Public Benefit Organisation.

He enabled, guided and oversaw the development and adoption of a SAMLA Transformation Policy; the establishment of the SAMLA Faculty; the development and delivery, in collaboration with UCT Law @Work, of a pioneering Postgraduate Training Course in Medico-Legal Practice; development of a SAMLA Code of Conduct for Medico-Legal Practitioners; commitment of SAMLA to Mediation of Medico-Legal Disputes; development of the SAMLA Guidelines and Protocol for Medical Mediation; establishment of a SAMLA Register of Medical Mediators; various pro bono SAMLA Pilot Projects in Medical Mediation; establishment of a SAMLA Register of Medico-Legal Practitioners;

collaborative groundwork towards establishing a South African Medico-Legal Coalition; and the collaborative multi-stakeholder Medico-Legal Crisis Presentation to the Honourable President of South Africa.

Of course Judge Neels did not achieve these feats on his own. He was ably supported by a strong cohort of experienced and ethical intellectuals, from various fields of expertise. It was his character as a leader that attracted strong men and women to surround and cooperate with him. He respected all, and despite his magnificent intellect he was humble. All with whom Judge Neels engaged were inspired by him and loved working with him.

His intellect shone not only in relation to the law. He displayed an enquiring mind, notably in relation to medical science, medical ethics and disability, never shy to keep asking questions. He listened actively and intently to whomsoever was talking, demonstrating respect and interest, leading to understanding. He displayed similar interests and knowledge of language and history. No problem was too big or too small for his interest and attention. It was these attributes that made Judge Neels such a good judge and such a good mediator.

In SAMLA, before realising his intellect, all who met him were struck by his warm heart, humour, generosity, integrity, morality, compassion and empathy. When he walked into a room one could sense an immediate elevation of the consciousness and energy of those in the room. He had a wonderful way of greeting people, so that in the greeting one felt important to him and respected by him, and he always tried to greet people in their own language.

Judge Neels was a true and devout Christian witness and believer. He displayed deep, caring and tender love for his wife Marietjie, his children and his grandchildren. Whenever he spoke about any of them his face

would light up with joy. Most of all he loved Jesus Christ. We who love Judge Neels take comfort in the knowledge that he is now with Christ. Rest in peace my dearest friend.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Herman Edeling', written over a horizontal line.

Herman Edeling.