

PRESS RELEASE
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Rhodes University names Student Union building in honour of Bantu Stephen Biko

As part of a critical appraisal of its past, Rhodes University has taken another step towards the ongoing transformation of its institutional culture with the decision to rename the prominent Student Union building the Bantu Stephen Biko Building.

With the Biko family's blessing a naming function, addressed by Professor Barney Pitso, will be held on 17 September 2008 at 1.15pm.

In public acknowledgement of various institutional actions that had barred black students from admission to Rhodes, and in apology to the Biko family, it is most appropriate that Rhodes University's students' union building be named after Bantu Stephen Biko.

A novel thinker, Biko played a critical role in the struggle for social justice and democracy in South Africa, and well personifies the qualities of leadership that Rhodes strives to cultivate in its graduates.

This is not only to honour and commemorate one of South Africa's finest sons, who hailed from nearby Ginsberg in King Williams Town, but also a gesture of penance on the part of the university.

In July 1967 the annual congress of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was held at Rhodes. NUSAS represented students from white and black universities. One of the delegates at this congress was Steve Biko, then a student at the University of Natal medical school.

A few days before this congress the Rhodes University authorities resolved not to permit black delegates to stay on campus in residence; nor would they be allowed to attend social functions on campus.

This meant that the black delegates had to find alternative accommodation in Grahamstown East. Biko and other black delegates were incensed, not only with the Rhodes authorities but also with the white NUSAS leadership who decided to carry on with the congress, rejecting Biko's call for it to be suspended.

Biko walked out of the congress and went straight away to New Brighton where he met up with a close friend, and our guest speaker today, Barney Pityana, who was then a student at Fort Hare. Together they talked through the night.

Over the next year they would work to establish a separate black national student association, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO). This would mark the founding of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa. The Rhodes authorities, in their enforcement of racial segregation, had triggered the emergence of this movement. At the same time they had displayed, not for the first time, a disturbing tendency to acquiesce all too easily in the apartheid system.

The decision of Rhodes University signals the University's commitment to redress past failings and to promote reconciliation and healing.

This does not negate the considerable achievements and successes of Rhodes University but declares a determination to embrace new values, to remake and renew the University, and to continue contributing to shaping a new future.