

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- University of Pretoria's (UP) Agriculturalist of the Century (2017)
- Honorary Doctorate from Stellenbosch University (SU) (2016)
- The *Sunday Times* Business Leader of the Year Award (2014)

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

He is a 'closet greeny' who likes nothing better than admiring the stars on his Karoo farm.

## AGRICULTURAL LEADER OF NOTE

As a youngster, Johan van Zyl's teacher had him present lengthy weekly book reviews to the handful of pupils attending De Grootboom Primary. The skills of persuasion and conveying an informed opinion that he learnt in this one-man farm school near Lydenburg have served him well ever since: First as a researcher working on issues related to risk management in the farming sector, land reform and market deregulation, and then as a university administrator and business leader.

Born on 1 June 1956, Van Zyl was raised on a citrus farm near Lydenburg in Mpumalanga. He completed his schooling in Volksrust, after which a BSc (Agric) from the UP in 1978 followed. "I was a poor student who preferred rugby to studying," admits the would-be farmer whose co-shares in his father's farms count among his many business ventures. "While doing compulsory military training, I realised my aspirations and what I did *not* want to be." Two postgraduate degrees *cum laude* set Van Zyl's course as an agricultural economist – and a double PhD at that. First came a DSc (Agric) at UP in 1985 and then a doctorate in economics from Vista University in 1990. "I wanted to be taken seriously and therefore needed to position myself strategically," he says, explaining why he persisted in his studies.

After working for the National Maize Producers Organisation and the national Department of Agriculture, Van Zyl started lecturing in the UP Department of Agricultural Economics in 1983. A full professorship followed in 1989. He supervised the research work of 15 PhD and 36 Master's students and published more than 150 scientific papers and chapters in 50 books.

He served as president of the Agricultural Economics Association of South Africa, and the country representative on the International Association of Agricultural Economists. He consulted to governmental departments, local private companies and international entities such as the Food and Agricultural Organization and the World Bank. Lasting business and political relationships were formed during this period. He also delved into the essentials of South African agriculture statistics and feels privileged that much of the research he did alongside colleagues and students was implemented, for instance, as part of new agricultural policy and in rethinking rural development in South Africa and its former homelands.

His research motivated market-based land reforms and the deregulation of agricultural boards to address historic imbalances. From 1987 to 1994, Van Zyl served on government committees such as the Brand Committee of Inquiry into the Marketing of Maize, the Committee for the Development of a Food and Nutrition Strategy for South Africa, and the Committee of Inquiry into the Marketing Act. In 1996, he became an assessor in the Land Claims Court.

Van Zyl helped mastermind the Graduate School of Agricultural and Rural Development that, from 1990 onwards, played a role in transforming UP's student body by introducing the first English courses. One year later he became Dean of the UP Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and could help to reposition it in the international arena through the signing of cooperative agreements with universities in the USA and Belgium.

## UNIVERSITY LEADER

A two-year sabbatical in 1994 saw Van Zyl leave for the World Bank in Washington. When a serious bout of malaria after a working visit to Nigeria left him comatose and initially undiagnosed in the United States, it was the impetus for the return to Pretoria of Van Zyl, his wife Cristelle, two sons and a daughter. Van Zyl found his feet again and became Dean of the newly constituted Faculty of Biological and Agricultural Sciences in 1996. Four months later, the 39-year old was named as the youngest person ever to serve as Vice-Chancellor and Principal of UP. "It wasn't the easiest of times, but we were a



young and energetic group working together," remembers this Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns and one of the founding Members of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf).

He set the university upon a much stronger financial and research footing, and approved new ventures such as the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI). While Rector, he still participated in research group activities and remained one of the university's most productive researchers.

## LIFE AS A BUSINESSMAN

"There's no sense in doing anything that isn't a challenge," says the man who prefers uncharted territory to routine. In 2001 he agreed to become the Chief Executive Officer of the short-term insurance company Santam. Two years later, up against several other applicants, he became the head of insurance company Sanlam. A *Cape Times* business reporter described him then as someone with "a no-nonsense reputation" who "does not get involved in fuzzy intellectual arguments. He listens to what others have to say, but they had better talk sense, for he has a way of cutting down to size anyone who tries to wing it. Once he has listened, he makes his moves, sometimes taking others by surprise".

He has since been hailed as the saving grace of a company that some described as a "lumbering Afrikaans insurance giant". It now has a footing in the financial services industry of more than 30 countries. Stocks prices improved twelve-fold and its market value rose from R14 billion to R170 billion by the time he stepped down in mid-2015 to take up new challenges in the Black Economic Empowerment business investment sector as group Chief Executive Officer of Ubuntu-Botho Investments and Co-Chief Executive Officer of African Rainbow Capital Limited. These ventures, aimed at the economic empowerment of the lower and mid-income markets, are backed by mining and investment leader Patrice Motsepe. As seasoned director, Van Zyl retains his ties with Sanlam after being appointed as Chair in 2017.

Many accolades have acknowledged his quality research, vision and leadership within the higher education and business sectors. Among others he was UP's Young Alumnus of the Year (1991), the *Cape Times*/KPMG Personality of the Year (2006), *Media24/Die Burger* Business Leader of the Year (2012) and the *Sunday Times* Business Leader of the Year (2014). In 2016, Van Zyl received

an honorary doctorate from SU, and in 2017 he was named UP's Agriculturalist of the Century.



**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

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**<http://research.assaf.org.za/>**

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A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

C. ASSAf Policymakers' Booklets

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# Legends of South African Science II

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

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