



Class of 1978: Roeline van Zyl, Tim du Plessis and Lizette Rabe, current Head of the Department

Photo: Hennie Rudman (SSFD)

Department of Journalism

CELEBRATES 30 YEARS

Stellenbosch University's Journalism Department this year celebrated its 30th anniversary. Lizette Rabe, current departmental head and member of the first class in 1978, looks back.

Founded in 1978 and based on the postgraduate journalistic school approach of the famed Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in New York, the "house" in Crozier Street has played a significant role in the development of journalism as a profession in South Africa. It seems that founding professor Piet Cillié's investment of visiting Columbia University to acquire the art from the Americans has, over 30 years, earned dividends in the form of quite an appreciable number of journalists and other media practitioners.

With its three postgraduate levels, about two dozen beginner journalists complete the programme at honours level every year. There have also been about 120 master's students to date, a few doctoral graduates and a good crop of current doctoral candidates.

But apart from healthy statistics, which are also evident when it comes to research - the Department has been one of SU's top achievers according to research-equivalent output - what contribution has the Department made in other areas?

A considerable number of editors have cut their

journalism teeth here - from the first year's Tim du Plessis of Rapport to one of the newest, Ainsley Moos of Landbouweekblad. Add to the list authors like Marita van der Vyver, who introduced a new phase in Afrikaans literature with her fearless description of the modern Afrikaans woman's life and world experience, and the Nieman fellows - the most recent, for 2007-2008, being Cape Times assistant editor Melanie Gosling, to see how diverse products of this department can be.

But what contribution has the Department in Crozier Street made to the "Stellenbosch discourse" - the place and role occupied by Stellenbosch in South Africa?

How has it helped to reflect critically on South Africa's "story of the day"? As the word journalism is derived from the Latin diurna, literally "the story of the day," how has Stellenbosch University's Journalism school contributed to telling South Africa's story?

Measured solely by the skin colour of Crozier Street's students through the years, it has told the story of South Africa's transformation from a privileged white (particularly Afrikaans) student force to intensive endeavours to establish a more diverse group. Today the department offers several bursaries to previously disadvantaged Afrikaans (coloured) students and the University is also the proud founder of the Percy Oboza and Aggrey Klaaste bursaries. Of course this is still not enough, and every year the Department strives to improve its diversity profile, despite a lack of funds.

In the same way the curriculum is still a "work in progress". In contrast to the "mog-het-trofte"

approach of the first year way back when (said with apology, but everyone from the original class would agree), the current honours programme has been developed into an intensive career course that dovetails multi-media practice and theory daily. The master's programme offers a challenge for both the practical journalist as well as the more theoretical media student. And the DPhil degree is evidently in a league of its own when it comes to the research demands made of the student.

But how does the Department meet the current demands of the new South Africa?

If one looks and the closely knit history of the former "unholy trinity" of the old SU, the old Nasionale Pers and the National Party, it is clear that the two survivors, SU and Naspers, have positioned themselves anew to meet the demands of a new democratic dispensation.

Similarly one could say that the Department of Journalism has transformed to the point where we constantly question whether our honours degree meets the demands that a complex society places on a beginner journalist. As regards our master's degree, we constantly question the reality of the media and our society. At doctoral level there is even a candidate who researches exactly that, namely how the curricula of South African journalism schools have changed to comply with the demands of a transformed society.

Indeed, if the Department is not self-critical, how would we ourselves be able to deliver critical-analytical products? 