

# To Share the Vision and Touch the Soul

“Thank you, *Jesus!*”  
So rose the shout of praise from the audience when Dr. Roland Edgar (Eddie) Mhlanga, danced across a stage in spring 1994 to accept his master’s of public health diploma from the UNC School of Public Health. More than 40 of the

joyful commencement guests were congregants at Barbee’s Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C., a community that nurtured—and felt nurtured by—Mhlanga’s indomitable spirit during the time he spent away from his native South Africa.

There was much that brought joy that year. Only days before—on April 27, 1994—South Africa had held its first democratic elections, with people of all races being able to vote for the first time. For Mhlanga, forced out of his local congregation in the South African village of Acornhoek because he opposed segregation, the North Carolina church family was a special gift.

The obstetrician’s journey to the United States was a blessing as well. His wife Lindiwe (“my better three-quarters,” he claims) had been selected as a W.K. Kellogg Scholar at UNC, and Mhlanga traveled to Chapel Hill

with her. Having been involved himself in the Kellogg International Leadership Program, he believed the master’s of public health curriculum at UNC offered analytical skills, competencies, and an understanding of community development that would be of great benefit to his and Lindiwe’s work in Acornhoek.

Now head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine in Durban, South Africa, and adjunct associate professor in the Department of Maternal and Child Health at the UNC School of Public Health, Mhlanga is champion of the rural poor and a stalwart advocate for women’s and children’s health.

He was drawn to the specialty, he says, because of desperate need in South Africa for advanced obstetric, gynecologic and pediatric skills during emergencies. As in the United States, many South African physicians are not willing to serve in poor, rural



Dr. Roland Edgar (Eddie) Mhlanga

areas after they finish their long training.

While serving as the first director of Maternal, Child and Women’s Health and Genetics in the National Department of Health in Pretoria, Mhlanga lobbied for reproductive and sexual health and rights—work that in 1996 resulted in South Africa’s Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act and later, legislation for the Notification of and Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths.

In 1999, as chief director of national health programs, he became involved in policymaking and education about nutrition and prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases.

Subsequently, Mhlanga’s leadership in women’s and children’s health has been solicited by international agencies such as the World Health Organization and United Nations agencies including the Children’s

Fund (UNICEF) and the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), among others.

In 2005, he became a member of the board of Ipas, an international Chapel Hill-based agency that works to protect women's sexual and reproductive rights and ensure that the termination of pregnancy is a safe procedure for those who seek it.

Elizabeth Maguire, president and CEO of the organization, notes that "Dr. Mhlanga has been a consistent and passionate supporter of women's reproductive rights, a man of conviction who has identified himself with issues such as abortion and HIV/AIDS that are often stigmatized. His leadership was pivotal to giving women in South Africa access to legal abortion in the 1990s, and he continues as a leading advocate to protect their rights under continuing challenges. He is a man of extraordinary integrity, compassion, spirituality, vision and eloquence."

Mhlanga is humble about his accomplishments. "The time [spent] in Chapel Hill allowed me to meet amazing people in the School and the Chapel Hill community. It affirmed that the challenges people face are the same all over the globe. We can all learn from one another."

"Life is a great gift," he adds, "and living it right—in harmony with people and the environment—is the greatest opportunity one has."

Mhlanga feels rewarded by the impact he has made on the lives of women in South Africa and honored to have been part of the great changes that have swept his country. He is immensely proud of his two daughters, one of whom has begun to follow in her father's footsteps by earning a joint Bachelor of

nan Professor Emeritus John Hatch ("who embodies what I want to become—a father and mentor to many, walking the talk and leading, by example, in humility").

The leader he admires most, though, is his late mother. "Sennie Mankareng n'waMalapane knew hunger and distress," Mhlanga recalls, "but made certain her children did not sleep with hunger. [She] taught me that my sibling is the person next to me. [She] taught me diligence and discipline,

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Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree at the Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

He delights in colleagues and friends he has made around the world and is grateful for leaders who have inspired him—Martin Luther King Jr. ("more concerned with justice than material gain"), Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi (for reminding him that "preoccupation with the past takes time away from the future"), and UNC Ke-

without which I would not have been where I am today."

All these leaders, Mhlanga says, have been "able to communicate their understanding of the human condition and to transcend human barriers by touching the soul and heart of people. That attribute," he says, "makes a great leader—to share the vision and touch the soul."

It's a description that fits him well. ■

— BY LINDA KASTLEMAN

Dr. Eddie Mhlanga (center) is welcomed into the home of Dr. and Mrs. Gebreamlak Ogbasellasse during an October 2007 visit to Eritrea. Mhlanga, adjunct associate professor in UNC-Chapel Hill's Department of Maternal and Child Health, worked with the Eritrea Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization to devise a system for notification of and enquiry into maternal and newborn deaths in that country. Mhlanga is head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine in Durban, South Africa, and holds a master's in public health from UNC. Ogbasellasse is an obstetrician/gynecologist and adviser to the Eritrea Ministry of Health.

