

Dr. Thulani Ephraim Kunene



4th May 1975 – 22nd December, 2010

Thulani Kunene, who was a PhD student in St. Andrews from 2001-5, was brutally and tragically murdered in Soweto South Africa just before Christmas. South Africa lost a lovely man and a potential leader of great charisma and integrity.

Thulani was born in a small village in Ladysmith, KwaZulu Natal. After school he studied Chemistry at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, funded by a Sasol bursary. He then joined the international fuels and chemicals giant Sasol where he was involved in the early stages of setting up a laboratory for Homogeneous Catalysis. He was selected as one of the first set of three South Africans whom Sasol sent abroad to study for PhDs in homogeneous catalysis. We in St. Andrews were delighted when he decided to come here to work in the group of Professor David Cole-Hamilton. He worked hard and showed a lively mind that could tackle difficult problems, bringing their solutions to fruition. His pioneering work, much of which was in collaboration with Dr. Paul Webb, who now works for Sasol Technology (UK) in St. Andrews has been published and he obtained a good PhD.

On completing his PhD, Thulani returned to South Africa to rejoin the homogeneous catalysis team in Sasolburg. He worked in a small team supporting a new process that had been installed, but, after a few years he moved into the intellectual property section. He then moved to PetroSA in Mossel Bay, where he was working when he died; although moves were afoot to bring him back to research and development in Sasol because his leadership skills were becoming very evident.

That is Thulani, the scientist, but what about Thulani the man? He was a charming person with a ready smile who got on very well with everyone in St. Andrews. He was a demon footballer and a committed member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Dundee, where, with his delightful wife, Khabo, whom he married shortly after starting his PhD, he was well known and very popular. He and Khabo had a son while they were in St. Andrews and a daughter after they returned to South Africa.

As a Seventh Day Adventist, Thulani was man of deep faith. He abstained from alcohol and from eating meat. He was a devoted to his lovely wife, Khabo and two delightful young children. He was a deeply thoughtful person who cared for others and whose horizons and acceptance of the world expanded as he moved further from his home. At a conference in Spain just before he came to St. Andrews he said: “When I was in my village, everyone was my friend; when I moved to Wits, every Zulu was my friend; when I joined Sasol, every black person was my friend; now I am in Europe, anyone who speaks English is my friend” – by the time he left St. Andrews, everyone was his friend. He was a lovely man who was exactly the type of person who should be leading the new “Rainbow Nation” of South Africa. His death has robbed that wonderful country of a genuinely honest and devoted leader. He will be hugely missed by so many people and our hearts go out to Khabo and the children. Please pray for them

David Cole-Hamilton

St. Andrews

19th February, 2011.