

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD
FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

2012

Ms Alexandra Sutherland
Drama Department, Faculty of Humanities
Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics

Ms Sutherland has been honoured for her extraordinary work with local schools and communities with the 2012 Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Award for Community Engagement. The award recognizes a sustained history of community engagement initiatives which she has been instrumental in conceptualizing, activating and sustaining over the past 11 years.

On her arrival at Rhodes in 2001, she immediately focused her teaching and research energy on aspects of theatre currently described under the heading Applied Theatre. Since 2001, as part of the Applied Theatre curriculum, second and third years, honours and masters students have implemented a diverse range of practical research projects in local schools and communities.

This has resulted in the Drama Departments sustained presence in over 12 Schools and organisations in the Grahamstown community under her leadership. She has been active in extending the courses beyond 'traditional' drama teaching contexts, to include community contexts such as adult and women's groups, prisoners and young people with special needs. She deliberately aims to support her students out of their comfort zones in order that they might engage with communities very different from their own.

She has been involved in projects such as the Art of the Street Project, a developmental theatre project with youth at risk with a special focus on street children. The work resulted in five theatre pieces being commissioned and performed at the National Arts Festival. It was then developed as part of an international exchange project between the UK youth theatre groups and youth theatre groups world-wide, resulting in a UK tour of the play. Subsequently the project has incorporated post-graduate students.

Ms Sutherland has developed the use of life skills education in prisons with young offenders for the President's Award Youth Empowerment Programme. This interaction has flowed into an extraordinary project called the Fort England Hospital Theatre Project (FEHTP), a collaborative venture between Fort England Hospital and the Rhodes Drama Department. The FEHTP forms part of the clinical and rehabilitative programme at the institution and has been running in the Maximum Security Unit (MSU), the only centre in South Africa which houses male, forensic psychiatric patients requiring maximum security, due to their respective profiles.

"The FEHTP is driven by a critical aesthetic and pedagogical framework (driven by practitioners such as Paulo Freire, Bertold Brecht, and Augusto Boal) which understands participation in theatre processes and products as a form of knowledge, learning and development," said Fort England Clinical Psychologist, Ms Lauren Fike.

Ms Sutherland's use of service learning as a methodology in the teaching and learning and research programmes of the courses in Applied Theatre has led to the establishment of the Masters in Applied Theatre.

This programme aims to provide students with diverse experiences of using theatre as a means of social and personal change in relation to different audiences, participants social and cultural contexts and theatre processes.

"The history and sustainability of the work carried out by Ms Sutherland provides the department and the university with extraordinary kudos," said the Head of Drama Department, Prof Andrew Buckland. "Her academic rigour, her vibrant creative energy and her capacity for dogged hard work make her a highly respected academic and practitioner in the country and we are privileged to have her practicing her craft in this community and under the auspices of this department and university," he added.

