



## **DESMOND D'SA – DIAKONIA AWARD 2013 CITATION**

For over 15 years, Desmond D'Sa has been a watchdog snapping at the heels of errant companies, particularly major oil refineries, who have polluted their way through decades of industrial expansion in the south Durban basin.

Ironically, it was industry that made him what he is today. As an employee at Durban Fibers and trade unionist in the 1990s, D'Sa gained first-hand knowledge of the horrors industrial chemicals present to workers and nearby communities. That subsequently set him on the environmental warpath.

Born in 1956 in Cato Manor, the young Desmond experienced injustice at a tender age when his family was forcibly moved to Wentworth, and then to Austerville where they were finally allocated an unsuitably sized council flat in which he has lived to this day.

But D'Sa's real involvement in community affairs began 18 years ago with the advent of gangs in Wentworth. The township had a lot of social problems and it lacked credible leadership in the sense that people did not know who to go to or who to talk to about social challenges.

"We managed to turn that around by creating the first public forum meetings through the Wentworth Development Forum, where we had people coming to talk about their problems and working together to try to resolve those problems," he says.

When he started off with issues of community consciousness, he was always told by industry bosses that they do not need trouble makers like him in south Durban. But he pursued his convictions, often going against a lot of advice, even from his own family and friends. They said that he would be taking on giants, he was not going to win and he was going to be marginalised. But he would not be swayed from his conviction.

In 1995, D'Sa was instrumental in the establishment of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), made up of 16 community organisations from the Bluff, Isipingo, Umlazi, Wentworth and Merebank, to address environmental and human rights issues in these areas. Through his coordination, SDCEA has forged links with like-minded local and international organisations to advance the cause of human and environmental rights.

D'Sa likens his work to a worldwide crusade, which in the last few years has seen him confront the boards of Anglo-American (of which Mondi is a subsidiary), Shell and BP in London and challenging board members at their annual meetings to address the poor environmental standards practiced by their companies in south Durban.

In a previous visit to the UK and Amsterdam, D'Sa joined forces with Friends of the Earth to protest outside Shell's London offices and its headquarters in The Hague. Through this campaign, Shell was forced to change its rotten pipelines in south Durban.

With SDCEA, they have been grappling with decisions taken by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs to allow a R150-million expansion at Engen, and the construction of what he maintains is an incinerator at Mondi. They have also been mobilising the community to reject the dug-out port proposal with its enormous negative environmental and relocation concerns.

His extensive role in the community is evident from the number of people who wave at him as he moves about the communities from one meeting to another, at times on foot. He is a friend, an advisor, a shrink and so many other things to the south Durban community members, who day in and day out visit him for advice concerning family, work, housing and many others.

In the greater Durban area, 'Comrade Des', as he is affectionately called by fellow activists, has become the face of civil society activism. His fingers are on virtually every struggle that is waged in the city.

Des is a founding member and convener of the Right2Know Campaign, a coalition of organisations and individuals opposing the Protection of State Information Bill (Secrecy Bill) and advancing the broader issues of transparency and access to information. He is also a vital cog of the Durban Social Forum and sits on a number of activist boards and church organisations.

Through his ability to listen to the people on the margins, Des has organised the poor flat dwellers into a respected pressure group that is advocating for their rights. He has also gone beyond the call of duty to work with the hostel dwellers throughout the city, to demand decent accommodation from the Municipality. When families had their shacks demolished and force-marched into a transit camp in Clairwood in 2012, D'Sa was there to be in solidarity with them and map the way forward. With his advocacy and ability to organise, the traditional fishing grounds were opened to the subsistence fisherfolk.

Through his mobilisation acumen, he has almost single-handedly successfully brought thousands of dissatisfied residents for numerous demonstrations that have taken place in the city through the years.

His work extends far greater than just south Durban, the province and the country. He has traversed the length and breadth of the globe on peace missions to Kenya, Malawi, Botswana, Zambia, Nigeria and many other places on the continent. Internationally he has made his mark in Texas, New Orleans, Louisiana, New York, Chicago, Seattle, Washington DC, San Francisco and California in the USA and in England, Ireland, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France, India, among other numerous social justice visits.

Des, you are a classical example of selfless service to sacred humanity. You have campaigned and advocated for the dignity of the disadvantaged and marginalised with missionary zeal and integrity.

You have contributed selflessly and tirelessly to the struggle for a just society, not motivated by reward or material gain. You have been unashamedly vocal and fearless in your criticism of injustice

You have been persistently clear about concern for victims of injustice, bringing them to the attention of the broader civil society movement and people of conscience and most importantly, challenging and mobilising them to plan an appropriate response.

We salute you for your outstanding contribution to the struggle against injustice, corruption and secrecy.

You have been an outstanding civil society champion who refused to sacrifice your voice of conscience at the altar of political correctness, and in the name of justice, you have not hesitated to apportion blame where it belongs, nor shied from taking appropriate action to dismantle the oppressive structures of injustice.

You have shown your willingness to take blows for the good of your community. We remember how your house was petrol bombed. We remember all the threats made to your life. Yet you refused to give up.

You could have opted to leave the country for the comfortable offices of London or New York, given your impressive curriculum vitae. But you felt it would be abandoning your people at their hour of need. Your inner voice told you that would be cowardice of the highest order. You opted to be with your people through thick and thin. And that you have done. For this, we salute you, Des.

Not only have you talked, you have also walked the talk. As an eco-champion, we do not remember you owning a car. As a friend of the poor and marginalised, we do not remember you living a flamboyant lifestyle. You have lived simply so that others may simply live. For this we honour you, Des.

You have been an inspiration to us as an organisation and indeed to all who long for peace and justice in our troubled country. It is a courageous voice like yours that is desperately needed especially at this time in our democracy, when it is under serious threat from those who are meant to uphold it, and when one African country after the other slides down the slippery road towards self-destruction.

We are proud to be associated with a heroic personality like you Des.

For this, the Diakonia family saw it fit to recognise and honour you by conferring on you the 2013 Diakonia Human Rights Award for your selfless and tireless commitment and contribution to environmental justice and human rights.