

New horizons

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He was the first black editor of *Die Burger* newspaper, chairperson of the South African National Editors' Forum and recipient of the sought-after Nieman Fellowship to study at Harvard University. These are but a few of the career highlights of Henry Jeffreys. What's more, this USB alumnus has just completed his MPhil in Futures Studies (through the Institute for Futures Research)... and he might still write that book.

Was your career dream always to work in journalism?

I have had many dreams. At high school I wanted to become a lawyer. Later an actor. I was quite an active and skilled amateur actor and I played in big productions in the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and the State Theatre in Pretoria – which was politically totally incorrect. In the latter I was Wilna Snyman's (Makiet) Diekie in Adam Small's *Kanna by kô hystoe*. I ended up in journalism by chance, but that story is too long. I will just say that I was three hours late for my interview. I was told to sit in front of a typewriter and to write a two-paragraph story, which made my future editor so excited that he immediately made me an offer. The rest, as they say, is history.

You were editor of *Die Burger* in Cape Town for four years and shortly thereafter editor of *The New Age* in Johannesburg for eight months. Why did you move back to Cape Town?

I actually never left Cape Town. My arrangement with *The New Age* was not to start a new career. I thought a year would be enough but ultimately it was eight months. By that time the newspaper was well on its way and my job became very predictable – a sort of been there, done that feeling. The launch of the newspaper was very exciting. It is a period of which I am very proud, despite all the drama around the newspaper back then. You must never say never, but for now, I am done working for corporate companies in the media environment.

So, on what do you focus nowadays?

My business card says: Strategy and scenario planning; Professional writer; Political analysis. That's what I've been doing – for just about all of my life. Writing and journalism, in particular, is in my blood and I will probably never stop doing that. The same goes for politics and strategy – that's one of the reasons why I did the MPhil in Futures Studies at the USB. I enrolled for it while I was still at *Die Burger* and it also had to do with the rapidly changing media environment in which I found myself.

In a nutshell, what is the MPhil in Futures Studies all about?

It opens up new horizons in terms of how you can use lessons from the past and experiences from the present to think and decide more meaningfully about what the future may offer. It exposes you to the powerful thoughts of very clever people from all over the world who see the future as a challenge for exciting opportunities – and actively help to shape it. And it has nothing to do with predictions or magic.

What subjects did you find interesting?

My primary interest was strategy and scenario planning. It is a powerful futures study methodology to unravel complex and sometimes messy problems and to determine the way forward. My research piece looked at the possibilities of large-scale, web-based scenario planning in the public domain. It is very exciting and I hope to get involved with similar initiatives in the future.

What lesson did you learn from this degree?

No problem is too big or too messy.

What is your opinion about the future of the media – will the digital media ultimately take over everything?

Ultimately, yes, definitely. But it will take time. The digital world has many challenges that make the need for news and other kinds of information almost universally instantaneously accessible. It is the true revolution of the information and knowledge era. Newspapers all over the world struggle with these challenges. Good newspapers that give valuable information and insight will still survive for a long time. It is, however, a reality that future generations will increasingly see newspapers as obsolete. Already, my children's generation doesn't, or hardly ever, reads newspapers. Those who do read, do it on iPads, smart phones and digital book platforms like Kindle. Journalism is enduring – it is simply looking for an effective platform.

What is your biggest career lesson?

You can be who you want to be, if you are willing to work for it. And don't be pushed into a corner by others – especially not bosses. Be your own person and try to sleep peacefully every night with a clear conscience.

What still lies ahead for you?

These days I don't think too far ahead. I presume I will stay active in the public domain, whether through journalism or involvement with activities endeavouring to make and keep the world a better place. Oh, and then there is that darned book that still needs to be written... with the studies behind me, it might just happen now.

More about Henry Jeffreys**Who are the special people in your life?**

My wife, Brenda, children and grandchildren, remaining brother and sisters, and a group of very special and appreciated friends.

Do you have specific role models?

I had important mentors like Johan de Wet, my first editor at *Beeld-Ekstra* and later at *Beeld*, and Ton Vosloo who appointed me at *Beeld*. Naturally, my parents were both role models, in their own way. But the man who I view as role model is very predictable, but nevertheless very important: Nelson Mandela.

When are you happiest?

On my back, on my couch in front of the TV or with a book.

What are you currently reading?

I read in phases. Sometimes I take a year to read a book or books. I am currently reading *The Founder* by Robert I. Rotberg. It's an old biography about Cecil John Rhodes. Also John Keay's *India: A History*, Hermann Giliomee's *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's *Why Nations Fail*. Ingrid Winterbach's *Die aanspraak van lewende wesens* is also on my nightstand. And on my bookshelf are all three of the *Fifty Shades* books, brand-new and unopened for months now.

Your dress style is unique. Why do you always wear caftan shirts?

I've worn these shirts since the 1980s when I worked with that true African, the late Prof Es'kia Mphahlele, at the Funda Centre. The Funda Centre was an institution that offered alternative teaching to Bantu teaching in Soweto. Back then, Prof Mphahlele and the centre's first director, Stan Kahn, a Jew, were already wearing these shirts. I immediately liked it because it confirms my Africanness and it is very comfortable.

Is there a gadget that you can't live without?

My cell phone (an iPhone) is always with me and if it ends up in water, like my previous one, you realise the crucial role it plays in daily existence.