

## Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Merit Award (VCDMA) recipient Izak Rohan Crafford is pursuing a Master's in German and lecturing at UP—despite many obstacles

### *Reflections on my university years, from the start of first year to postgraduate studies and lecturing*

Izak R. Crafford

*"No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.*

*And therefor never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."* – Meditation XVII, "Devotions upon emergent occasions", John Donne

The day is quiet, the Lenten melancholy of descending autumn has veiled it in warm hues and laced the memories floating through my mind with gold. The keys of the old Dietmann piano yield willingly to the pressures of my fingers and my thoughts as I consider the theme I was asked to write on in this article, written without any literary pretences and yet victim to my literary tendencies and Romantic heart even so. Had I not taken it in, the piano would have been disposed of. For some reason, this fact kept intruding into my attempts to arrange thoughts, images and considerations into a semblance of something that could be written down. A turn of fate, that would have been the death knell for this fragile piece of sound South African craftsmanship. A possible turn of fate. And yet, there it was, in front of me, sounding my thoughts and giving me



counsel in my search for the appropriate structure, the fitting words. A turn of fate. As I played through a newly composed piece in preparation for a little recital, that came to be the organizing principle according to which what I present here, is arranged. Whether the resulting text would even remotely be what was expected, whether or not it would be even remotely acceptable or whether my longwinded pontifications would be edited out, I knew not, but it is my hope that my humble words will be of some slight use to you. For I shall do what I was asked to with as much frankness and clarity as I can, perhaps with a more thoughtful slant than expected, but clinging steadfastly to the facts.

But let me not forget my manners. An introduction is called for, I think. I am Izak Rohan Crafford, currently pursuing my Masters in German here at UP, my focus particularly being on literature. I am also an amateur poet, organist, pianist, composer and passionate gardener. And before you, dear reader, accuse me of concealing information from you, I should add as an aside that I am also blind. I say it like that,

straightforward and without any softening of expression, because I find the various euphemisms developed over the last few decades a vexation at best and attempted disingenuity at worst. [I mean to say, differently

abled! All people are differently abled when compared to others! Such deceptive nonsense.] Having given you as much of my biography as you need for the moment, let me briefly pursue that thought. What is this wariness of and around people with disabilities? What is this fear that causes them to leap out of our way and take flight at the first opportunity? Can one blame them for their mistrust and sometimes open fear? Let me ask you this:

“Did you jump back when you read the line in which I shared the fact of my blindness? Did you sit very still for a moment to allow your

view of this possibly somewhat odd article to be adjusted?” Please be honest with yourself. I will be honest in return by telling you that I very deliberately kept that element of my biography for last, in order that I might put it to use.



Having attended a school for the visually impaired here in Pretoria, I had mainly only known blind people, having had very few sighted acquaintances, particularly among my own peers. Part of that doubtlessly can be attributed to having little patience with my peers, [that has always been the case and probably always will], but I find that the isolation from sighted peers also contributed greatly to this state of affairs. My blind peers I couldn't understand very well, having been raised with a focus on independence, my parents determining not to emphasize my disability and let it become the determining factor of who I grew up to be. For this I will be eternally grateful to them. The other side of the coin was, unfortunately, that I didn't understand my sighted peers very well either, my school having had just about no social interaction or, for that matter, interaction of any other kind with sighted schoolchildren, excluding the few occasions they would be brought to visit us as though we were strange animals in a zoo – no, I don't blame them for it. Had I wanted to blame someone, I would need to go back several centuries to find the beginnings of the idea that people with disabilities are “different” and “to be avoided”.

I decided before going to university that I would very deliberately seek good relations with sighted people and was willing, as I still am, to turn my back on what they call the blind community. I knew, of course, that doing so would be no easy thing, but considering my upbringing and my nature, I found that it had to be done. Though this decision has led to a certain mutual suspicion reigning between myself and the “blind community”, I cannot claim to regret it. When I was asked to write on the journey of transition from school to university, it was at once clear to me that this would be an important theme in my article.

Ere I proceed with my narrative, I wish to pause, briefly to reflect on an interesting and valuable element of my transition from school to university life. The information that I had been awarded the Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Merit Award certainly came as quite a surprise when I received notification of that fact early in 2019. I remember very well that I was sitting under a tree to the north of the Humanities Building when I read the email. I could not have known then what a profound blessing this would be, not only as a way of meeting and interacting with new people, but also as an academic motivation and a key factor in my being able to pursue my Honours at UP in 2022. They say it is ungentlemanly to talk about money and I agree with that sentiment, but I know not whether I would have been where I am now, had I not come to be a beneficiary of the university's benevolent patronage. Furthermore, you will find that money unfortunately is an important concern for many a student. It was, however, by no means only in a financial sense that I benefited from this award; on the contrary, I find that the fruit of my receiving it are various. A moment that still stands out in my memory is the speech Professor Tawana Kupe, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University, gave at the 2019 VCDMA welcoming event, along with that given at the same event by Mr Wallace Isaacs. Though I shall not describe the content of either address, I will point out that it was a consolation to know that I found myself in an institution striving for academic excellence in all fields in which it is active. Looking back, I can only confirm this from my own experience at UP and from having benefited from that mind-set a number of times, as I will

relate to you in due course. Added to that, I suspect that those words acted to strengthen my resolve to strive for the same, something I particularly keep in mind now that I am starting work on my dissertation and when I am standing at the front of one of the little rooms in the dungeons of the Humanities Building, unfolding for my students the rich tapestry of German literature and history.

I dare say I can count on your indulgence as I relate a humorous incident that took place sometime last year. [Please note that I did not ask for permission to tell it.] My guide dog is a particularly determined creature, disinclined to avoid crowds if she can plough through them, flowerbeds if the opportunity presents itself to have me confront some or other monstrous plant, preferably well-armed with spines, or bushes when she thinks that I am naturally just as tall as she and must therefore be equally able to pass under their branches. I was walking past the front of the Old Arts Building while Professor Kupe addressed what I have deduced to be a group of American diplomats. Dixi, my guide dog, [to be seen in both accompanying photographs], decided that, the group of people having gathered exactly where she would normally walk, she would have to demonstrate to them her superiority. After all, her name means "I said" in Latin. While I was still attempting to determine exactly where the voices were coming from, she rapidly accelerated. And then it had been done. Head innocently held high, [one could not accuse her of lacking self-confidence], she had guided me straight into the little gathering, as I had to realise on account of having rather forcefully bumped into someone. Though I had just embarrassed myself terribly and desired nothing more than to flee to a very distant place at great speed, Professor Kupe greeted me kindly and the Americans admired Dixi delightedly.

My excursion now being complete, permit me to return to relating my transition from school to university, picking the thread back up where I left off describing the goal I had set myself before the start of my first year and what had led me to set this goal.

Along with my parents, another factor contributing to my goal at the start of my university career was a dear friend whom I first encountered in a classroom at school, a friend who would come to lodge with us for four years and who, being himself partially sighted and, [I am sure he won't mind me saying so], somewhat disconnected from the "blind community", exerted a strong positive influence on me. And so it was that I have my parents and him to thank for the attitude with which I contacted the student who would become my first year Latin tutor. He stated that he would be willing to show me around on campus and made an appointment for me with Dr Koos Kritzinger, who would become one of my Latin lecturers. I could not have dreamed of being received as warmly as I was received by both and both went to great lengths to answer my questions and to assist me in getting accustomed to the university life.



Allow me to pause for a moment. Why is it that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, apparently a century of civilization and progress, people are still divided by our physical characteristics? Why is it that identity politics seem to desire this division of humankind to continue into all eternity, keeping us from recognising our common humanity and using that foundation to build solid human relationships? "Is that even possible?" you may want to know. "Yes," I tell you and, because you cannot hear my voice, I will add that I do so sternly, landing a firm blow on my desk for emphasis. You may desire to point out to me that discrimination is commonplace and complicates things. "Yes," I would respond, "but I think that it should be the goal our generation sets itself to clean the slate and to approach one another with tolerance, openness and compassionate hearts." We should keep in mind that no two people are exactly the same. There are differences between all of us and each of us has some sort of "disability", whether visible at first glance or not. Human relationships ought not be dictated by politics, the desire to elevate one group above another and to unseat yet another, for it is not all about hierarchies and power, whatever so many have said. The human project shouldn't be determined by an interest in power that blinds our eyes to everything else and of which our hearts and, in the end, our very being as a civilisation, a society and our beings as individuals are casualties. Instead of seeking to be relieved of the bitter burdens of the past, our society seems to want to destroy itself by revelling in them, rolling in their clinging mud like a happy herd of elephant to let it soak in thoroughly. We could have a brighter future before us, but we have to do something to get there. And no, the problems won't all vanish at once, but I find that, with sufficient humility and compassion, they can be left behind. Added to this, it will cost a lot. We will have to rid ourselves of prejudices and sometimes dearly treasured stereotypes, be willing to have our minds changed, allow ourselves to grow and be transformed as we engage with others and realise that, similar to the individual line in a piece of counterpoint, we are individuals, but must work together to create one equal music. For the individual line in a polyphonic piece is naught without the others, by means of conflict and harmony with which it is shaped as an individual element and contributes to the whole. By fostering and increasing divisions, insisting upon isolating ourselves beyond redemption and clamouring unforgivingly about the sins, real or invented, of others while glibly overlooking our own, we insist upon depriving ourselves of the full, fulgent polyphony we might have heard. Being torn asunder and efforts at reparation being hindered, the music must fall silent and be conquered by the stillness and tenebrous despair of the sepulchre.

Now that I have for the moment done preaching, let me give you some further biographical details. Though I thought throughout much of high school that I would study something related to botany, a major key change occurred when, with time, I came to the conclusion that I should read languages. Perhaps it's in my blood, for my mother is a poet and language teacher. Teaching too is in my blood, but I'll get to that soon enough. And so it was that I came to UP in 2019 to study English and German, [which would become my majors], Latin, Afrikaans and history. Regrettably Afrikaans, Latin and history were casualties of increasing specialisation. I can assure you that it was particularly hard to let go of Latin, in which tongue I still seek to keep up my skill as best I can.

Given what I explained before, you will hopefully be unsurprised by the fact that I preferred to communicate with lecturers myself rather than having the disability unit solve the various challenges facing me around every corner. It certainly should not indicate an unwillingness on the part of the staff of the disability unit to assist me; indeed, when I called upon them, they assisted with eagerness and competence. But you may call me a bit of a lone wolf if you want, for I decided to go it alone, being warmly welcomed in each of the departments in which I studied and gaining a small number of loyal student friends along the way. The value in selecting the proverbial road less travelled is that better human relationships could be established. I could answer the lecturers' questions myself and we could work together to find solutions to problems. This worked astoundingly well. Another benefit was the increase of my tendency towards independence and certainly a rapid development of creative thinking. From conversations I would later have with lecturers, I conclude that they didn't view it negatively either.

I could tell you various anecdotes about getting acquainted with the Hatfield Campus, revelling in the historic buildings, falling into flowerbeds, having to ask students to capture my guide dog when she had gone after a cat and many other things, but I wish to turn my attention to the Dregeana day residence, which I joined at the recommendation of a former executive committee member whom I had met during a strange little joint project between my school and Waterkloof.

One of the first things I did during Welcoming Week was to write to an executive committee member to request his assistance in attending a house event. We were to meet outside the front door of the Humanities Building, [incidentally, a place where I very often still meet people, particularly before walking off with them for a cup of tea or a bite to eat, usually at Adler's, my patronage of which is a further gift of the VCDMA award]. I could not have known then that the executive committee member who met me there and assisted me with the necessary arrangements would be appointed as my mentor or that I would have the privilege of counting him a dear friend years later, but so it was. There were naturally many questions from my sighted fellow house members, but it was remarkably easy to establish sound human relations with them, firmly founded in our common humanity and, very often, shared interests and/or hobbies.

It was also my Dregeana mentor, along with the fraternal reception I received there, that encouraged me to volunteer for service in the first year committee of the house and to serve as mentor myself in 2020, 2021 and again this year, 2023. Perhaps my inclination to teach is also somewhat to be blamed for this decision which, I can assure you, I do not regret in the slightest. Encouraged and informed in thought, word and deed by my Anglican Christian faith, it was a profound joy to be at the service of others as they adjusted to university life, spending many hours with them over multitudes of cups of tea or on long walks on campus, my guide dog, whom I acquired in August of my first year, ensuring that a good dose of entertainment was never absent.

The weather was remarkably similar to that of the day on which I write this text as I attended the Dregeana first year camp in 2020, came down with a severe cold and watched from home as the Coronavirus lockdown gripped the country. It was veiled in silence, the silence of a requiem mass, the silence of knowing that an epoch had died. That may sound like reflections in hindsight, but I looked at some poetry I wrote during those first months of lockdown and found these ideas all over the place. It was a time of melancholy, but also of taking great steps in my studies. While I still took great joy in studying English literature and Latin, my main delight had become German. On account of my first semester mark and the fact that there were only two students in the Honours literature, [DTS 756], class, I was invited, together with another student from my group, to join in and partake in the text discussions. A challenge it certainly was to push my acquisition of the German tongue so as usefully to be able to contribute to those discussions, but with the encouragement of Professor Stephan Mühr, it worked and I continued delighting in the rich treasure house of German literature throughout my final year, prompting me to pursue my own Honours in German and write my mini-dissertation on a literary subject. What may have seemed an insignificant turn of events in 2020, has turned out to be of great importance in my academic career now that I am starting out on my M.A. in German. [It has to be admitted that I had great difficulty avoiding inserting German expressions throughout this text or, let us be helped, writing all of it in German...]

The feast of Christ the King on 21 November 2021 was grey and wet and very far removed from being dismal. Shortly before, I had been asked to serve as parish organist at St Wilfrid's Anglican Church, [the Anglican chaplaincy at UP], and to become involved in the student ministry, which had to be rebuilt after the destruction wrought by the Coronavirus lockdown. On that Sunday, 21 November 2021, I premiered my newly created St Wilfrid's Organ Mass in a pre-service recital and, later that day, received a momentous communication in which I was asked whether I would be interested in an assistant lecturer position in the context of the third year German literature courses DTS 362 and DTS 364. I already told you, dear reader, that teaching is in my blood. Since being a primary school boy, I had been certain that I was called to teach. So, of course, I at once said yes and, once the formalities had been properly seen to, found myself somewhat unexpectedly with a dream of mine having come true and, to crown it all, within a department in which I am sure of the support and good will of my colleagues. A dream of mine it was, but lecturing was not something I took up lightly or without being aware of the responsibility I would have placed on my shoulders: the responsibility to ensure that the environment within which the often challenging engagement with literature takes place, be safe, the responsibility of paying attention to the needs of every student, of seeing each of them as a person fearfully and wonderfully made, no matter what challenges complicate interactions with them, the responsibility of selecting every word with care and of treating my students with compassion, no matter what. Yes, it is a privilege, but it is no easy thing. It is not a thing that is done without tears being shed, fear, worry and desperate prayer. Let me present to you two poems I penned last year, both of which reflect on my lecturing experience. Perhaps they might encourage prospective students in that they seek to show that lecturers do take our job very seriously and will the best for our students, despite challenges that may put in an appearance.

... ..

## On handling vessels of cracked earthenware

pouring water into earthen vessels  
of fulgent face and gracious form;  
lo, how men scorn  
these vessels which their own hands cracked,  
hands which long this grace have lacked.  
How the water splashes, spills  
and I would scorn the cracked earthenware,  
but disdained potshard once rebuked stabbed its blade into my heart and did it scare,  
did it too break that nothing now its grieving stills.

Contrite, brought low  
by the hammer's blow  
do I bend down, the cracked clay pot for to lift,  
from the dust, to heal its rends and fill it well with treasured gift.

... ..

## In a fall meadow at dusk

Jewel-like autumn's bloom  
on curving meadow's bosom flowering  
set among stalks torn and trodden down by that towering  
he of cloven hoof, fulgent in descended gloom,  
upon my sight imprinted true,  
though you tarnished are, must I behold and guard you.

How frail you waxed and courteous  
on grasslands where night's serpents creep and eat



light's quickening cloak, to rise up and make a seat,  
cold as sin for their prince that wills but tenebrous.

Rain of ice and frozen breeze will batter, beat and bite,  
oh, how he'll seek to lure you into his winter's blight.

For this reason must I guard you and instruct, by grace correct you and you keep,  
that you may stand still courteous, be true in winter's deep.

... ..

For some sensible reason or other, [I do not remember what exactly it was], I found myself on campus during Welcoming Week this year, surrounded by droves of newly arrived first years, excited, uncertain, joyous and lost in the face of the new movement of the sonata having started without all its themes and ornaments yet being known – please excuse my continual musical metaphors. I took a long walk along my usual route with my guide dog, stopping off often at well-liked places to enjoy the shade of a particular tree, read the cornerstone of the Old Arts Building with my finger, pause for a moment in the contemplative quiet of the UP Chapel porch and trace the joints of the stained glass window there, hearing, smelling, feeling the university awakening all around me, before proceeding to do whatever it was that I had come for. All the while, my mind dwelt on the beginnings of my own university journey, the uncertainty, the many questions, feeling lost in a vast and unknown space, alone in the large, billowing crowd of students. I thought too of the generosity of so many, moments of kindness, many melancholy walks in the cool of the early morning, friendships forged, my mind challenged and my perspective expanded, my heart opened, and beginnings, unexpected harmonies and endings. I recalled the moments when I was the one who could welcome anxious first years into Dregeana Day House and pledge to support them, promising the same as had been promised to me when I myself had been an anxious first year. I considered the responsibility of mentorship and, now, of lecturing, of being privileged to help others have their minds challenged and their perspectives, broadened, all the while keeping the class room as a safe space. Yes, I concluded, it has been a long journey and the key changes have been many, but it has been worth it, however many sleepless nights and melancholy hours it has brought me. Where this journey will lead, what the composer of this music intends, I know not and cannot know entirely until the final note dies away or, to draw on John Donne's words quoted at the start of this text, until the bell tolls for me.

As I consider returning to my old Dietmann piano, there to play through the new piece which I am soon to premiere, taking note of every musical line, its individuality and its function in the whole and expressing it, every key change, moving from one section of the work to another, regarding always the new unfolding character of each movement, let me conclude with a word of encouragement to prospective or even current students. You may be frightened of the change that your coming to university will bring, but always remember who you are and that you will not

journey alone. There may be many moments of loneliness, of desperate longing for a companion on what may seem a frightful road, but appreciate the little acts of kindness done to you and hesitate not to do little kindnesses to others. Expressed in musical metaphor: delight in the unexpected harmonies and resist the dissonance's dark pull. Gather your courage and go to people, talk to them and listen with care. We all take from one another and give one another of ourselves, all being part of mankind. To return to the quote with which I started: ""No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main..."