

NEWS RELEASE

UP and Buddhist community distribute wheelchairs ‘as tools of empowerment’



Wheelchair recipients from Meerhofscool, John-Paul Hatting and Bonang Segole being pushed by his dad

PRETORIA – There were smiles all round when 102 wheelchairs were handed over to nine schools, hospitals and community organisations in Gauteng, following a collaborative project between the Oxford (UP) Centre for Religion, Public Life and Security in Africa (O[UP]CRPL) and the Buddha’s Light International Association (BLIA).

Twelve other wheelchairs will in future be used to help improve access to and mobility on UP’s campuses, and access to UP’s Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy Departments in particular.

The wheelchair handover ceremony was part of the annual Inter-Religious Week organised by O[UP]CRPL, an entity of the Department of Religion Studies in UP’s Faculty of Theology and Religion.

Three types of wheelchairs (for adults and children, and so-called CP recliner chairs for people living with cerebral palsy) were distributed. This was made possible through international funding from the BLIA, which currently has over 170 active BLIA chapters worldwide providing help to communities in need. The logistics

behind accruing and distributing the chairs were handled by the Fo Guang Shan Nan Hua Temple in Bronkhorstspuit, in cooperation with the Pretoria Chapter of BLIA.

“We were honoured to have Venerable Professor Huei Kai, a Buddhist scholar and philosopher from the Department of Life-and-Death Studies at Nanhua University in Taiwan and its Institute of Religious Studies, representing BLIA in handing over these wheelchairs,” said Professor Alice Chan, Vice-Chair of BLIA Pretoria and Associate Professor in UP’s Graduate School of Technology Management.

Associate Professor Maniraj Sukdaven of UP’s Department of Religion Studies, who is also Director of O[UP]CRPL, said he was both grateful and overcome with emotion when he first walked into the hall where the rows and rows of wheelchairs were on display.

“A big thanks to the BLIA for allowing us as academics and university staff to make a tangible difference in the lives of others,” he said. “It is great to share in the good that is part of life, as it helps to foster a greater understanding between different communities and religions.”

Prof Sukdaven also thanked various UP role players, including O[UP]RCL staff and interns, the Faculty of Theology and Religion’s Marketing Department personnel, and UP’s Department of Occupational Therapy, for their instrumental roles in identifying and screening potential wheelchair recipients over the past few months.

Professor Kitty Uys, Head of UP’s Department of Occupational Therapy, explained that wheelchairs are much more than mere assistive devices or modes of transport for people with mobility issues. They are “a tool for empowerment” and “a gateway to independence, self-determination and inclusion”.

“A wheelchair offers individuals the ability to actively participate in life, fostering curiosity and control over their surroundings,” she said.

“Mobility is essential for engaging in everyday activities such as self-care, work, school and leisure. It plays a significant role in maintaining a person’s quality of life. Without access to independent mobility, people with motor impairments face limitations that can hinder their ability to explore, learn and engage with their environment. This restriction often results in social isolation, apathy and reduced cognitive and psychosocial development,” Prof Uys added.

Chairs were donated to Holy Cross Home (an assisted living facility), the Community Oriented Substance Use Programme (COSUP), Ithembelihle LSEN School in Germiston, Kalafong Hospital, Pretoria West Hospital, Meerhof School in Hartebeespoort, TIBA Services for the Blind, the Tshwane Leadership Foundation and the Mamelodi Old Age Home.

The wheelchair ceremony was preceded by a public lecture delivered by Venerable Professor Huei Kai, as part of the Inter-Religious Week. Prof Huei Kai, who is also the Deputy Abbot of the Fo Guang Shan Monastery, is touring South African universities as part of an outreach project and spoke on current and future studies related to life and death.

Inter-Religious Week 2024 was held from 1 to 4 October under the theme ‘Peace and Unity’. O[UP]CRPL supports and advances academic research and contributes to knowledge about the impact of religion in all areas of society, particularly public life and security. It trains leaders to engage with public life issues from a theological perspective. Although the Centre’s main focus is vested in research on and within the context of Africa, the involvement of global society and how it influences Africa is also part of its mandate.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

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