

SA's Indiana Jones of fossil hunting

THEKISO ANTHONY LEFIFI

THE late Professor Phillip Tobias wanted to be a writer or a journalist when he was younger, but his family told him there was no money in that.

Nonetheless, the world-renowned palaeo-anthropologist — who died last year aged 86 — managed to “make a pig of myself” by writing more than 1 200 articles and co-authoring 33 books.

Tobias, who was nominated for a Nobel prize three times, taught and mentored more than 10 000 students in a career spanning more than 50 years at the University of the Witwatersrand.

He chose a career in science after his sister fell victim to diabetes at the age of 21 and no one in South Africa could explain why the disease had skipped a generation. While he was in his teens and still grieving, Tobias set out to be the first geneticist in the country, “which in fact I did”.

In a short film of the shooting of his portrait by 21 Icons mastermind Adrian Steirn, Tobias spoke about his involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Tobias, a former president and chair of the National Union of South African Students, described

the apartheid era as “a 40-year Dark Ages”.

Tobias said that, for him, Nelson Mandela's release from jail had meant there was now much to live for, whereas previously there had not been. “It was a remarkable revolution in the country's evolution. It was a turning point.”

Tobias was instrumental in the process to have the remains of Saartjie Baartman, who was exhibited in Paris as an ethnological and sexual curiosity in the 19th century, returned to South Africa in 2002.

Tobias negotiated with France on behalf of the South African government.

For the Tobias portrait, which is published in the R17 edition of the Sunday Times, Steirn wanted to show the palaeo-anthropologist holding an old-fashioned hurricane lamp and walking stick. Steirn said the props evoked his days of doing fieldwork and uncovering the mysteries of human evolution — “a real-life Indiana Jones”.

A short film about the shooting of the portrait was made at Tobias's office at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he was professor emeritus of anatomy and human biology. It will be shown on SABC3 tonight at 6.57pm.



LEGENDARY SCIENTIST: Phillip Tobias being photographed in May 2010 at the University of the Witwatersrand

Pupils flee under-par Eastern Cape schools

PREGA GOVENDER

PUPILS are abandoning Eastern Cape public schools because of “the poor quality of basic education”.

This damning admission is contained in the provincial education department's latest annual report.

Pupil enrolments in the Eastern Cape's public schools dropped by 91 563 in 2011, according to the latest statistics contained in the Department of Basic Education's annual schools survey.

A further drop was recorded at the beginning of the year.

In 2011, enrolments in Free State schools dropped by 1 659, and by 22 121 in Limpopo.

In the same year, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and Western Cape schools recorded increases of 76 849, 33 883 and 9 876 respectively.

The Eastern Cape's education department said that parents were also leaving the province for economic reasons.

Eastern Cape districts that recorded the biggest decrease in pupil enrolments between 2010 and 2011 were Sterkspruit, Fort Beaufort, Idutywa and Lusikisiki.

Last year, Democratic Alliance leader Helen Zille caused a furore when she tweeted that the Western Cape had built 30 schools, mainly for Eastern Cape “education refugees”.

The Eastern Cape education department's superintendent-general, Mthunywa Ngonzo, admitted in the report that man-

agement and governance structures had collapsed.

Western Cape education MEC Donald Grant's spokesman, Bronagh Casey, confirmed that 18 852 pupils from other provinces, including 16 510 from the Eastern Cape, had enrolled at the province's schools this year.

At least 44.2% of new enrolments in the Western Cape this year, excluding Grade R, were from the Eastern Cape. Last year's enrolments from the Eastern Cape were 16 792.

Rural areas are blighted by the absence of infrastructure

Gauteng education department spokesman Gershwin Chuenyane said that, on average, there was a 2% increase in pupil enrolment every year.

He said that the department assumed it was owing to urbanisation.

Mncekeleli Ndongeni, Eastern Cape provincial secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union, said the department was “brave enough” to admit it was failing.

Eastern Cape education department spokesman Loyiso Pulumani said the rural areas “are blighted by the absence of infrastructure” and some teachers might be underqualified.

However, new schools were being built, he said.



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