

Martin Wittenberg Memorial

by Assoc Professor Andrew Kerr

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Good morning. I have been asked to speak about Martin's work as director of DataFirst at the University of Cape Town. Martin was my boss at DataFirst between 2011 and 2020, after which I moved into the School of Economics and became Martin's colleague. He has been my mentor throughout this time.

Martin embodied many of the qualities an academic should have- he cared deeply about his research and his teaching, he trained and nurtured future generations of academics, he made substantial contributions to university administration, and he connected the academic project to the broader world through his work on the measurement of social processes and outcomes.

DataFirst was very important to Martin, and I'd like to try and explain why I think that was the case. DataFirst is an example of what economists call a public good- something that is useful to everyone but which there won't be enough of if everyone acts selfishly. DataFirst exists primarily to make other researchers' lives easier. It allows researchers to easily access microdata for their research, and it provides guidance and training on using the data.

Under Martin's leadership, DataFirst developed a reputation for excellence in training and research, in addition to the core work of making microdata accessible to anyone, which began in 2001 when DataFirst was founded by Francis Wilson.

In his role as DataFirst director, Martin drove a training programme funded by Statistics South Africa. At the start he had a clear vision about what should be taught and why. He

helped to push the programme through the required faculty and university processes, and he did all this as extra work on top of a full teaching load in the School of Economics. The teaching of skills in using survey data to better understand the world, but also to improve measurement of things society cared about was a core contribution of Martin's and an outworking of his academic vision.

Last year in October, Martin's colleagues and former and current students held a conference to honour Martin and his contributions to us and to the academic project. All of those present at the conference who spoke, spoke about his integrity, his commitment to finding out the truth and to using data carefully and responsibly- traits which he also inculcated in the students he supervised.

Martin's research on measurement, on data quality, on the labour market, on household dynamics and in other areas, his teaching and DataFirst's role in making data available and in training people to use the data provided in a responsible way, has shaped the South African research community fundamentally.

After my PhD I was offered a job by Martin and a job at another South African university. I had never met Martin and was unsure about which job to take. Over dinner in Mowbray a friend persuaded me to take the job with Martin by saying he was the best researcher in applied microeconomics in South Africa, and I would learn the most from Martin. He was so right!

I soon found out Martin had very little need for note taking. In meetings he'd take out his pad

and pen, make a few doodles, not really write anything substantial, and then be able to recall almost all of what was said at the next meeting. In those same meetings I was frantically scribbling down all the ideas and thoughts he was discussing as fast as I could so as not to forget them later.

Reflecting on my time in DataFirst, I realise I had undertaken a 9-year apprenticeship under Martin's guidance. Martin's mentoring style was to show me the ropes, then let me get on with the task myself, providing further guidance if I asked for it. He was not a micromanager or controlling. When he had concerns or complaints about my work, he addressed them directly and clearly and then didn't come back to the issue once he had made his point.

Martin was generous. Many times, in giving me advice he could have said what was best for DataFirst or himself, but he seemed happy to give advice that he thought was best for me. I know he did the same for many other people.

In recent times when his health was not good, Martin's econometrics teaching was one of the things that kept him going. In 2023 he helped to man the School of Economics stand at the UCT Open Day, a compulsory job but one which most senior professors skip. At some point he was enthusiastically discussing weighted least squares, heteroscedasticity and how several textbooks had got some of the fundamental things in that area of econometrics wrong. I doubt this would have persuaded any 17-year-olds overhearing this to take economics but it impressed me. I have hope that the econometrics notes he has produced over 20 years of teaching will be turned into a textbook, because there are insights there that a broader audience should read.

I miss Martin. I will miss the sound of his keys jingling as he walked down the corridor to his office. I will miss the way he had time to chat as he walked past my office. His intellect, wit, his struggle background and varied life experience meant that chats with Martin were opportunities to learn and to gain a different perspective on the world. I will miss those chats. The UCT community will miss someone so dedicated to all the things a university should be about.

Nozipho, Ali and Ben and Martin's sisters and extended family: we his colleagues and students mourn with you. We thank you for sharing your dad and brother with us.

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