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Nelson Mandela's ties to UMass remembered as trustees mourn his death

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 11, 2013 01:59 PM

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Nelson Mandela and his wife Graca Machel are joined by a 12-member University of Massachusetts delegation after a ceremony in the university gave honorary degrees to Mandela and Machel. Behind Mandela's right shoulder is former university President Jack M. Wilson.

By Matt Rocheleau, Boston.com Staff

University of Massachusetts trustees on Wednesday praised Nelson Mandela as they mourned death of the former South African president who had several ties to the university.

UMass awarded its first-ever system-wide honorary degrees to Mandela and his wife Graça Machel, a humanitarian and educator, during a ceremony at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg in 2006.

Mandela's daughter, Makaziwe Mandela, studied at UMass Amherst, earning a master's degree in sociology in 1989 and a doctorate in anthropology in 1993.

And, in 1978, UMass Amherst became the second American public university to divest its holdings in apartheid South Africa.

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“Our ties to President Mandela and South Africa are important and should be a source of pride for everyone connected with the University of Massachusetts and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” trustee board chair Henry M. Thomas III said at the meeting at UMass Dartmouth, according to a university statement.

“President Mandela was a man of integrity, profound courage and extraordinary perseverance,” he added. “Nelson Mandela put his entire life on the line for a cause that transcended South Africa.”

The trustees unanimously approved a resolution that praised Mandela for his “singular contribution to the quest for freedom and democracy” and his “commitment to a peaceful transition and to forgiveness and reconciliation in the new South Africa.”

The resolution was introduced by trustee Ruben King-Shaw, one of the UMass officials who traveled to South Africa seven years ago to award Mandela and Machel their honorary degrees, the university statement said.

“It was a transformational moment in my life and in the lives of all who traveled with us to meet this man who transformed his nation and the world,” said King-Shaw.

Marcellette G. Williams, the university’s senior vice president for academic affairs, student affairs and international relations, also attended the ceremony in 2006.

“President Mandela firmly believed in the power of education to transform our own lives and the lives of those around us,” she said. “As Mr. Mandela often said: Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.”

At the trustee meeting, UMass President Robert L. Caret noted how UMass Medical School helped discover the nevirapine as an effective treatment for preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV. The discovery has been credited with saving more than a million lives worldwide, including many in South Africa.

The university statement said Caret pointed to the honorary degrees awarded to Mandel and Machel and said: “These degrees, the first and only system-wide honorary degrees we have awarded, were among the last that President Mandela chose to accept, and it is safe to say that he did so because the name ‘University of Massachusetts’ meant so much to him, on so many levels.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).



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