

Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: Dr. Jerome Slammat

by Lorlene Hoyt

November signals the fifth installment of our *Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement* series. This issue features Dr. Jerome Slammat, Senior Director of Community Interaction at Stellenbosch University, Chairperson of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum and active member of the Talloires Network's Steering Committee.

Slamat, after serving for four years as Chairperson of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF), is stepping down this week. Slammat described his position of Senior Director of Community Interaction at Stellenbosch University as one that “fits me like a glove.” The son of a painter and domestic worker, Slammat is the youngest of 6 children. He grew up in Elsies River on the Cape Flats (Cape Town), lovingly surrounded by people who skillfully and unknowingly practiced Martha Nussbaum's concept of “compassionate imagining” towards him.

His high school and university years, however, were “turbulent.” Here he was surrounded by student boycotts in opposition to the apartheid system. Engaged in a national union of young Christians (MJUSA, now known as the Moravian Youth Union of South Africa) standing against the apartheid regime, Slammat developed a “vision of an egalitarian and caring society, with no discrimination on the basis of race, class or creed.” He was shaped, too, by “progressive lecturers” at the University of the Western Cape who helped Slammat discover the requisite “intellectual tools to analyze and articulate the nature of our oppression and our vision of emancipation.” In his final year as student leader, Slammat was arrested, beaten by imprisoned murderers, and ultimately found not guilty of public violence, a charge that carried a five-year sentence.

Slamat views himself as a “bridge” –someone who “understands communities, especially poor communities” and “knows the academy.” He strives to introduce different kinds of knowledge systems into higher education and works to get others to see the university, especially Stellenbosch, in a new light. When prompted to describe the community engagement achievements for which he is most proud, Slammat pointed to the 2011 Community Engagement Conference in East London, South Africa. With about 300 participants including both “local minds and international speakers,” the conference was an important milestone in creating a community of practice dedicated to integrating community engagement, academic research, teaching and learning.

In September 2012, at the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University, the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum held the first of three seminars sponsored by the Walmart Foundation and facilitated by the Talloires Network. Entitled “Sustainable Livelihoods: Cooperatives, Access to Markets, Health and Wellness,” 35 participants representing 19 universities tackled such questions as: What innovative and collaborative practices are universities involved in that promote development and transformation of the local economy?

Slamat believes “we are bound to each other internationally with the challenges we face” and that community engagement can “bring back the founding sentiments of the university.” He believes we can create a different, more sustainable world by working together to co-produce knowledge for seemingly intractable societal challenges.

With a Ph.D. in Education Policy Studies from Stellenbosch University, a Masters degree in Education and a Bachelors degree in Commerce from University of the Western Cape, Slammat serves today as a member of the National Research Foundation’s expert panel on community engagement. This is one of his many strategies for moving community engagement to the forefront in academic consciousness. It frustrates him that community engagement is sometimes marginalized within the academy. According to Slammat, “My contribution to education in South Africa and globally is not yet complete.” He will remain in his position at Stellenbosch University and will continue to serve SAHECEF and the Talloires Network.