

Law Libraries: Johannesburg

Johannesburg High Court Library refurbished

This is an edited text of an address delivered by Judge Fayeza Kathree-Setiloane, chair of the Library Committee, at the launch of the Gauteng Local Division's refurbished High Court Library, on 17 September 2015.

Also present were Judge President Dunstan Mlambo, Deputy Judges President Phineas Mojapelo and Aubrey Ledwaba and other judges of the high court:

The purpose of this afternoon's gathering is to celebrate in the words of the Department of Justice 'the refurbishment of the Gauteng Local Division, High Court Library'. I would, however, rather we embrace this gathering as a celebration of the launch of our 'new' library.

The Library was renovated from a single storey resource facility to a double-storey one. The ground floor of the Library continues to house various collections of legal texts, loose-leaf journals and law reports both national and international for use by advocates and attorneys as well as by members of the public involved in litigation in the court, while the second floor houses a collection of legal texts, loose-leaves and law reports for exclusive use by judges of this and other courts.

What this new space offers to judges is a quiet place in the library for research and writing with a collection of legal texts and law reports for exclusive use by them, computers and network points to access digital resources, and a kitchen with tea and coffee to ease the burden of working late into the evening with court preparation, judgment writing, research etcetera. The judges' reading room has become particularly popular amongst judges and acting judges of the Supreme Court of Appeal, and the Labour Appeal Court who are drawn from this Division.

The High Court Library has gone through periods of enormous stress and neglect. The period between 2007 and 2010 was particularly challenging – senior librarians were poached by law firms and universities offering competitive salaries and better conditions of employment, and replacement librarians were simply ill-equipped to deal with the enormity of the challenges that an ill-equipped, under-resourced high court library posed. The Department of Justice, in turn, showed little or no will to rectify the situation.

Emeritus Judge Neels Claassen was presented with the (almost) insurmountable task of lifting the Library out the morass



From left to right:
Judge Kathree-Setiloane (Current Chairperson of the GLD Library Committee) ; Deputy Judge President Mojapelo;
Judge President Mlambo; Judge Claassen (Former Chairperson of the GLD Library Committee)



From left to right:

Seena Yacoob (JHB Bar Representative on the GLD Library Committee); Thulisile Nzimande (Current Chief Librarian); Judge Kathree-Setiloane (Current Chairperson of the GLD Library Committee); Deputy Judge President Mojapelo; Judge President Mlambo; Salome Vranas (Former Chief Librarian); Judge Claassen (Former Chairman of the Library Committee); Judge Vally; Judge Mphahlele; Judge Sutherland (Judges Sutherland, Vally and Mphahlele are members of the GLD Library Committee)

that it found itself in. To put it simply, the Library was in “tatters”. The texts and collections in the library and judges’ chambers lacked integrity and dependability. Government Gazettes and loose-leaf collections had not been updated since 2008. New edition legal texts were not purchased and the cataloguing systems were simply non-existent.

After numerous battles that eventually played out robustly in the national press, the Department of Justice finally saw the need to intervene constructively. Just prior to this, however, Judge Claassen, in his capacity as Chair of the Library Committee, expressed his concerns in the press at the state of the Library and criticised the government for its failure to resource the Library. The Johannesburg Bar Council came out in support of Judge Claassen but surprisingly and quite without precedent, the spokesperson for the Department of Justice, Tlali Tlali, rejected the criticisms of Judge Claassen to the point of putting his credibility into question by stating that the Department of Justice was very serious about providing the Judiciary and other professional staff in our courts with the necessary tools in order for them to carry out their mandate - when this was far from the case at the time.

Finally, in mid-2011, the Department of Justice eased up on its dilatory attitude to the state of affairs of the Library and allowed the Library Committee at the time which comprised Judges Claassen, Dimphheletse ‘Seun’ Moshidi, and myself to employ Ms Salome Vranas as acting Chief Librarian. Ms Vranas, who had served a period of 18 years previously as Chief Librarian of the Library, was tasked with doing a complete “clean up” and “revamp” of the library.

Ms Vranas served in an acting capacity for 11 months and was then appointed to the position of Deputy Director, Library

Services in April 2012. Soon thereafter, our current Deputy Director, Library Services, Ms Thulisile Nzimande joined the Library as a Senior Librarian. Together with the assistance of the library staff they set about the task of ‘cleaning up’ the library as well as the judges’ chamber libraries.

The loose-leaf collections in the chamber libraries had not been updated for five years since early 2008 and with the assistance of LexisNexis the library staff updated over 4 000 loose-leafs. In 2012 the library upgraded the judges’ chamber libraries to the value of R1,5 million. Currently, the chamber libraries at the Gauteng Local Division are said to be the best in the country, even surpassing those in the Supreme Court of Appeal. The library resources too were upgraded and re-equipped. The Gauteng Local Division Library is by far the largest high court library in the country, housing approximately 76 000 books – not bad in comparison with the Constitutional Court Library that currently houses between 80 000 and 100 000 books.

The Library has finally developed into a major repository for judges, lawyers and members of the public. Ms Vranas retired in April 2014, and the Library is currently being led by Ms Nzimande, who has in the months since Ms Vranas’ retirement, shown tremendous leadership and drive in ensuring that the integrity of the library remains intact. She is supported by the staff of the library and four researchers who provide the judges with research assistance. Judge Claassen retired in August 2014, and I now chair the Library committee. The Judges of the Gauteng Local Division of the High Court are indebted to Judge Claassen and Ms Vranas for their dedication and unrelenting efforts in elevating the library to its former glory – and beyond. **A**