

WILLIAM PETER VENTER

Bill Venter comes from humble South African stock. Born on 29 July 1934 in Johannesburg, he matriculated in 1952 at Helpmekaar College with a first class pass.

His father worked for the Public Works Department as an Inspector and, when the young Venter left school, financial circumstances militated against his going to university. He joined the civil service as a pupil technician with the Post Office. Driven by a keen desire to educate himself further, he attended evening classes at the Witwatersrand Technical College where he qualified first for the National Engineering Diploma in Production and subsequently for the National Electronic Engineering Diploma. Fired by an urge to improve his academic qualifications still further, Venter went to the United Kingdom where, after a further three years of study and technical assignments in London, he qualified as a chartered engineer and was subsequently elected a Fellow of the British Institution of Electrical Engineers. To supplement his technical qualifications he also successfully took the British Institute of Marketing Management examinations and became a member of The Institute.

After completing his training with the Post Office, Venter joined STC, a major overseas-owned telecommunications group as a telecommunications engineer. His talents were soon recognised and at the age of 31 he became Group Marketing Manager. Two years later, in 1965, he resigned because the foreign shareholders were unwilling to allow South African participation in the company's top management structure or its equity. In the same year he formed Allied Electric (Pty) Limited, one of the first South African controlled electronic, telecommunications and electrical companies, with the specific objective of making the country independent of foreign control in these highly strategic areas. The company started with R24 000 and three employees, and Venter's vision and drive resulted in the creation of a global business that was named one of the world's top 300 diversified small technology companies. Today Altron employs some 13 000 South Africans and another 5 000 people in other countries, including China and the United Kingdom.

Convinced that technology alliances could deliver high quality jobs to South Africans and develop an important skills base, Venter set about crafting his global group of technology companies. His belief in alliances was so strong that he was willing to set out on his own and compete with his previous employer, STC. When he heard that STC was to be sold by ITT, its parent corporation, he travelled to New York and camped for more than a week outside the door of ITT's legendary President and Chairman, Harold Geneen until he was finally granted an interview. Venter returned home with his prize – he owned the company that had once employed him.

In the years since, he has put together a string of enviable alliances. The associations are two-way streets and partners often license Altron technology for use elsewhere in the world, and even use Altron developed technology in their home markets. These alliances have led to hundreds, if not thousands, of high technology jobs in Africa, and his early vision and constant support has made a significant contribution to South Africa's commercial and technological advancement. His companies often created a critical mass for ongoing research funding and education widely recognised both here and abroad. As far back as 1981 the first black woman to qualify as a telecommunications technician in South Africa did so as a result of his help.

Success in commerce and industry invariably carries with it an image of ruthlessness and a diminished level of concern for humanity. This is not the case with Bill Venter who has never lost

the common touch and has enormous reservoirs of compassion and concern for those less privileged than he is. Those who work in close association with him are aware of the hundreds of letters he receives each week requesting help and also of how, when corporate budgets for social responsibility are stretched to their limits, Bill Venter will use his personal resources to alleviate need wherever he can.

Many individuals have benefited from his generosity and he has also taken a keen interest in community projects. He has funded schools to meet the needs of dispossessed San people in Namibia and under-resourced children in Ulundi. At the request of the Mayor of Daveyton he built a tennis club there and funded a tennis coach to instruct the township's children. He funded the refurbishment of former President Mandela's old schools at Qunu and Nkalanene near Umtata and is currently completing a R2,5-million school for the Bomvana nation at Elliotdale. He is also a Trustee of Mandela's Trust Fund for Underprivileged Children. In all he has funded seven schools which together educate more than 9 000 children.

In addition, he has supported the endeavours of higher education institutions. Several technology and medical projects at technical universities are funded by Altron Group companies and by Bill Venter personally. He has conceived and given form to original proposals such as the structuring of the Black Management Foundation based at the University of the Western Cape to promote the flow of competent and qualified black managers into the South African economic system. This was preceded by the establishment of a training facility for aspirant Black technicians.

During the apartheid era, Venter, who deplored discrimination of any kind and strove to abolish it within his company, worked courageously to desegregate the Altron Group workplace in defiance of the Separate Amenities and the Job Reservation Acts. From 1980 onwards, he initiated equal pay for all employees doing comparable work and established training programmes, bursaries and social upliftment programmes for black staff.

Bill Venter has received wide recognition and awards including an Honorary Doctorate in Business Administration from the University of Northlands, Canada (1987), Honorary Doctorates in Commerce and Business Economics from the Universities of the Free State (1987), Pretoria (1998), and Port Elizabeth (2001), and an Honorary Doctorate in Engineering from the University of Natal (1992). In 1988 the State President awarded him the Order of Meritorious Service Class 1: Gold (the highest honour the state can bestow on a private citizen) for his, "significant contributions, over nearly three decades, to the electronics industry in South Africa and for rendering exceptionally meritorious service in the general public interest". He is a former Chairman of the CSIR and a Director of the Anglo American Corporation as well as the Ambassador for South Africa to the world body of the Institution of Electrical Engineers and has at various times been voted South Africa's "Top Business Man of the Year", "Marketing Man of the Year", "Production Man of the Year", and "Professional Engineer of the Year". He also holds Unisa's gold medal for "Leadership in Practice."

Entrepreneur, industrialist and philanthropist, Bill Venter is a true son of South Africa, who, with fierce patriotism and in the face of great technical, political and commercial odds, has given birth to and nurtured the most significant electronic, electrical, communications and information technology group of companies in the country. It is fitting that this university, situated as it is in the industrial and employment heartland of the country, should recognise his achievements.

It is with great pride and pleasure that the University bestows on William Peter Venter the degree of Doctor of Engineering *honoris causa*.