

BY PATRICK BURNETT

Passion & perseverance

AS A young boy growing up in the townships of Pretoria, Thomas Kwenaité craved knowledge because a teacher had told him it was the route to power. Practising as a journalist years later, and after he had confronted one of the country's most powerful institutions, Kwenaité realised that the power which knowledge creates also leads to corruption.

Kwenaité's investigations uncovered corruption in the administration of South African soccer, leading to the government-appointed Pickard Commission of Inquiry and the resignation of soccer supremo Solomon "Stix" Morewa.

The 1997 winner of the Ruth First Award for Courageous Journalism says he now realises the importance of truth over power.

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," Kwenaité said at a seminar on investigative journalism presented by Technikon Pretoria's Department of Journalism.

Some of South Africa's top investigative journalists spoke at the seminar, revealing the background to the stories which have made headlines, and giving their views on what constitutes investigative journalism.

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"We are living in a brutal society where our politics stink," says Kwenaité, "we are no longer living in a land of boerewors and koeksisters. People are dying every day and embezzlement is a fact of life."

Kwenaité was threatened with baseball bats, sued for R45-million and offered R50 000 to stop his investigations into soccer corruption, but refused to be deterred.

"Steve Biko said 'I write what I like' and I don't want to be instructed as long as what I write is truthful and factual."

The speakers at the seminar stressed the need for detailed reporting on South

African issues, and highlighted problems facing investigative journalists in the country.

Jacques Pauw, whose investigation into Vlakplaas hit squads began in 1984 and culminated with the showing of the documentary *Prime Evil* in 22 countries worldwide, says journalism in South Africa is at a "terrible stage".

Citing low standards and quality, he says there is not enough investigative journalism in South Africa and that the onus lies on individual journalists to produce stories.

"Editors would be prepared to spend more time on investigative journalism if their journalists produced stories," he said.

Pauw says it is the duty of the individual journalist to specialise and know their subject — "from there it will flow".

The financial implications of investigative journalism were highlighted by a team from the *Mail&Guardian*. "The cost of investigative journalism," said news editor Rehana Rossouw, referring to *Mail&Guardian* reporter Mungo Soggot's investigation into, and exposure of, the Central Energy Fund controversy involving Emanuel Shaw and Don Mkhwanazi, "is exorbitant".

Legal costs are "staggering" and there are no immediate benefits other than the reputation of the newspaper, she said, adding that the exposure of Shaw did not sell more copies of the newspaper.

"It's about risk and it is an expensive risk. Reporters have to take the risk on behalf of the newspaper and many newspapers are not prepared to take that risk."

Roussouw acknowledged that weekly newspapers have the time to do in-depth coverage, but she said this was not an excuse for the daily newspapers.

Referring to Shaw as a "financial war criminal", Soggot said the newspaper "went for him every week".

"The point is that he was still earning our money and therefore it was still newsworthy that he was still in power."

Shaw turned to the courts to halt publication and although an interdict against the *Mail&Guardian* was dismissed, Shaw later sued the newspaper.

Soggot said the courts "don't respect that you depend on people giving you information on a confidential basis".

Noseweek editor Martin Welz also spoke of the legal problems facing journalists, saying South African journalists were considered guilty until proven innocent before the courts. The law in South Africa does not understand the press and is highly suspicious of the press challenging authority, he said.

Clive Emdon from the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) said investigative journalism plays a key watchdog role in "matching the pillages of the politicians".

In order to do this journalists need the qualities of passion, perseverance, courage, commitment, dedication and tenacity.

Emdon says there is a "fertile field" for investigative journalism in South Africa, with investigative journalism having a key role to play in contributing to an accountable society.

"We live in an incredible story day by day with huge amounts of information which we have not come near to tapping."

The seminar also featured journalists working in community media who had broken national stories through their investigations.

Irma Green, news editor of the *Lowvelder* and the reporter who exposed corruption in the top echelons of Sanlam management, said investigative journalism places enormous responsibility on the journalist.

Green said investigative journalism is about digging for facts and getting all sides, not only both sides.

She said those who spoke in a derogatory manner about community newspapers should bear in mind that they were capable of "making big waves".

Linda de Nysschen, the *Lowvelder* reporter who exposed corruption in the Mpumalanga Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, emphasised the importance of the community press in acting as watchdogs over local government.

"The community press often does not get the recognition which it deserves," she said.

De Nysschen said community newspapers were often involved in doing ground-breaking news and exposing corruption, and people often did not realise this input into national stories.

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Linda de Nysschen