



Rudolf Gouws: A man of humour and many talents
Supplied

Rest in peace, Neef

It was early 1980. I had just started Standard 8 at an old-fashioned boys' school in Joburg (corporal punishment was still very much *de rigueur*). A representative from Junior Achievement (JA) came to our school and addressed our class.

JA is a youth-serving nonprofit organisation, delivering hands-on learning in entrepreneurship, work readiness and financial health to millions of students in more than 100 countries today. Or at least, so its website tells me – I have not come across the organisation or even really thought about it in 45 years.

Fifteen-year-old me did, however, find its pitch interesting enough, so I signed up for a 12-week after-hours programme somewhere in Parktown.

The JA people gave us an introduction to business: how to develop a product idea and how to design, manufacture, market and sell it. There was also the financial side: raising capital, keeping accounting records, reporting back to stakeholders and eventually wrapping up the business and distributing the net proceeds.

We made screen-printed T-shirts. They weren't very good, but we turned

a small profit. No doubt the experience played a formative role in setting me up for a life in investments.

Each group had a mentor assigned to them: somebody from the business world who was kind enough to donate their time. Ours was a charming and brilliant young economist from Nedbank, one Rudolf Gouws. He was not at all like any of my teachers with their thick glasses, big moustaches and safari suits.

Blood ties

After meeting Rudolf in our first session, I got home and told my father that I'd just met this other very interesting Gouws. To which my dad responded in typical fashion: "What variety of Gouws is he?" (Meaning, where did he grow up, who is his family, and so on.) How was I supposed to know?

When I pitched up at JA a week later, I was armed with a number of questions from my dad. Rudolf also had no idea, but he solved the situation by giving me his father's telephone number. "Tell your old man to phone mine, and maybe they can figure out what variety of Gouws both of us are," he said.

It turned out we were very much the same variety: Rudolf and I shared a

great-grandfather, which made us second cousins.

As my own professional career got going some years later, I often came across Rudolf in the Joburg business world. He was by then the most renowned economic commentator in South Africa. I was only an apprentice, but he never forgot me or the fact that the two of us shared blood.

Whenever I bumped into him, he would address me as "Neef" with his melodic voice and beaming smile.

I used to think this was just a function of him remembering the family connection; only later did I learn that it might have been because he was, in fact, not very good with names (he called all his workmates "Colleague" for the same reason) – a rare shortcoming in a renaissance man who could do practically anything.

After finishing a storied career with Rand Merchant Bank a decade and a half ago, Rudolf and his wife, Sonia, retired to Stellenbosch, where the two of them generously supported a multitude of artists, musicians and charitable causes.

At last, there was time to focus on other passions. The couple attended classical music performances across the Boland, and Rudolf also served on the advisory committee of the Woordfees. He made olive oil from his own vineyard and turned his hand to sculpting with tremendous proficiency.

Rudolf had that unique ability of taking a vast, complicated topic and breaking it down into a handful of soundbites that always made total sense. He was king of the anecdote and master of the one-liner. After listening to him for a few minutes, every audience member would walk away and feel like they understood the economic cycle and its main levers.

He was also very funny. He always smiled. He lit up a room with his presence. He was everyone's friend.

Rudolf passed away after a short illness a few weeks ago. I will miss him terribly. I could kick myself for not making time to see more of him in his final years. I hope to learn from this and not make the same mistake with other people who are dear to me.

Rest in peace, Neef. We'll never meet your like again. ✕

Gouws is chief investment officer at Credo, London