

Profile - Michael Barry

Michael Barry, born in 1954 in South Africa, has had an illustrious career that spans decades of dedication to the fields of art, culture, and education. With a rich educational background and a lifelong passion for visual arts, Barry has made significant contributions to South Africa's artistic and cultural landscape. His personal and professional journey reflects resilience, leadership, and a deep commitment to fostering arts and heritage in South Africa.

Barry's academic journey began at the renowned Paterson High School in Port Elizabeth, where he completed his matriculation. His early career saw him working as a Computer Operator at Ford Motor Company. However, it was a two-year stint as an engine room oiler for SAFMARINE that opened his eyes to the world, allowing him to travel and experience diverse cultures. During a visit to New York's Guggenheim Museum, Barry found inspiration in the works of artists like Vincent Van Gogh, fueling his desire to pursue art as a profession.

Encouraged by his mentor, Catholic priest Fr. Geoff Goodwin, Barry enrolled at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art, where he earned a BA in Fine Art with Honors. He furthered his education by obtaining a Higher Diploma in Education (HDE) and later completed his Master's in Art Education at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

After completing his studies, Barry's career began as an art teacher at a primary school in Lenteguer, Cape Town. However, due to South Africa's Apartheid-era policies, he was forced to leave, deemed overqualified to teach at a primary school level. This experience highlighted the challenges of teaching in an oppressive political environment. Nonetheless, Barry continued his work at the Haven Night Shelter while pursuing further qualifications.

Barry's most prominent teaching role was at St Thomas Senior Secondary School in Port Elizabeth, where he taught art for 11 years. This school, the only "Black" art school in the Eastern Cape during Apartheid, allowed Barry to play a crucial role in nurturing young artists during a politically turbulent time.

Following the end of Apartheid in 1994, South Africa's government restructured its education system, integrating arts and culture into the curriculum. Barry was offered a leadership role as the Deputy Chief Education Specialist for the Eastern Cape's Department of Arts & Culture. He managed various arts and crafts programs, laying the groundwork for future cultural initiatives.

In 1998, Barry formed the Arts & Teaching Initiatives (ATI), a nonprofit organisation focused on arts education and project management. Through ATI, he coordinated a variety of training programs and worked on SETA-funded projects aimed at developing South Africa's creative sectors. His role as Regional Coordinator for Business and Arts South Africa (BASA) allowed him to build partnerships between businesses and the arts.

In his later career, Barry joined Nelson Mandela University, where he served as Deputy Director of the Department of Arts, Culture, and Heritage for 11 years until his retirement in 2019.

Barry's impact on public art is visible through his involvement in projects such as the Route 67 Public Art Project and the Sunday Times 100-Year Heritage Project. His work has been showcased internationally, including in the United States and the United Kingdom. In recognition of his contributions, Barry has received several accolades, including the Citizen of the Year Award (Arts and Culture Section) and the 2020 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Nelson Mandela Bay Theatre Complex.

Even in retirement, Barry remains an active force in the arts. He continues to work with several organisations, including the Northern Areas People Development Initiative (NAPDI), the South End Museum, and the Northern Areas History and Heritage Project.

For Barry's lifelong dedication to art, culture, and community, Rhodes University is proud to bestow on him a Doctor of Laws (LLD) (honouris causa). This award will be conferred at the Rhodes University graduation ceremony at 09h30 on 11 October 2024.