

AVBOB FCJ EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Mr Carl van der Riet, AVBOB CEO

Embargo: 02 August 2024 (Johannesburg)

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure to be here with you tonight. A special welcome to all our esteemed guests and to the **AVBOB** FCJ Excellence Awards nominees and recipients.

We are honoured to partner with two great organisations - Media24 and Caxton - in these awards to highlight and celebrate the vital role of community journalists. And also, to have an excuse for a great evening out together!

The Excellence Awards are not merely about recognising past achievements, but about reaffirming the importance of place of community journalism in shaping our future. Your words, whether in the form of ink on paper or pixels on a screen, bind our diverse communities and give us direction.

I am very pleased to see the continued growth of the awards. This year we have over 500 entries for the competition. I sincerely hope that it will continue to grow in the future in line with a vibrant and growing body of community journalists.

This year's awards are extra special, as the winners will take home a handcrafted trophy from our **AVBOB** Industries factory in Bloemfontein. This exceptional trophy is made of solid Kiaat wood with brass finishings. We know you will not only like it – but cherish it!

This year, we are also delighted by the introduction of a new writing category. The best vernacular writing category is a major leap forward in supporting media freedom in all official written languages. We believe it is critical to encourage community journalists to express

their talent in their linguistic heritage, and to connect with diverse readers in meaningful ways. We live in a beautiful country with rich diversity in culture and expression. In order for us to achieve the fullness of our potential as a nation, I firmly believe that we need to learn to appreciate and celebrate our differences with respect. Our diversity is unique and should be used as a platform for uniting rather than dividing our people.

Diversity is the cornerstone of our organisation. Embracing diverse languages is not new to us in pursuance of our social initiatives. Since the start of the **AVBOB** Poetry competition in 2017, for example, poets have been encouraged to submit work in their mother tongue. In the 2023 competition, 55% of all poems entered were written in South Africa's vernacular languages.

A shared future

Our support for these **AVBOB** FCJ Excellence Awards stems from a shared purpose: we both believe in the power of community. We are deeply rooted in the communities we serve, and we see community journalism as a vital source of information and empowerment.

We know that the world of community journalism is not without its challenges. We hear the news about the shutting down of print operations of some of the country's iconic print publications. As journalists, I suspect many of you have reflected on these developments and what it means for your profession going forward in an ever-increasing digital world. Yet, despite these challenges, you've consistently demonstrated an unwavering commitment to your craft and your communities. We appreciate your tenacity and ability to find new and impactful ways to tell the stories that matter.

As a business, we stand ready to continue our support to community media - as one of the platforms to reach communities - in order to preserve a vibrant, diverse and independent press. Tonight, we are celebrating brave and exceptional journalism!

As I have said before, there is a clear alignment between what we are doing within our organisation as well as what you, as community journalists do – and I am not referring to burying people either literally or figuratively!

As a business we invest heavily in education, and more specifically in literacy. We are investing in developing the readers of the future. You are committing your lives and careers

to creating articles and literature that informs, educates and activates hearts and minds. Together we are committed to creating a society that is informed, engaged and has a voice in determining their future.

Community initiatives

Many of you may be aware of our Container Library project. To date we have donated 70 libraries to underserved schools reaching over 68 000 learners and providing them with 210 000 books in all 11 languages. The value of this investment is over R35 million.

Over the last two years we have expanded our social programmes by also investing in Early Childhood Development centres nationwide. We believe the foundation of learning starts with early childhood development.

Over the past three years we have branched out by adding our “Road To Literacy” project. In this program, we use our social media platforms to ask people to nominate deserving schools to receive a mobile mini library stocked with 300 books in the appropriate local mother tongue language. This year we received over 7 000 nominations. Last year we donated 260 libraries, this year it was 500 and next year we aim to increase it to 1 000. At this point, I do need to acknowledge our partner in this project – Oxford University Press Southern Africa – for their role in the sourcing of the books.

We have also updated our **AVBOB** STEP-12 program which provides Grade 12 teachers and learners with free language subject preparation guides.

Through initiatives such as these, we will continue to create a society that can read and participate meaningfully in the growth of our country. Excellence in education, combined with excellence in media, will create a stronger South Africa for all.

Now, I hope you will indulge me for a minute and allow me to tell you something which we are very excited about. As you know, we are a business that exists for the benefit of our members. Earlier this year, we launched our **AVBOB** Member Rewards programme.

The **AVBOB** Member Rewards programme is free for all **AVBOB** members. All you need to do is Opt In on our website. Once you are opted in, you immediately qualify for monthly vouchers, grocery coupons and discounts. Each month the platform is re-stocked, and you

4.

can log in again and claim once again! It is a remarkable offering and is specifically designed to return meaningful, tangible value to our members.

We launched about two months ago and already have over 65 000 members registered and receiving benefits. My aim is to have all 2.6 million members registered! To date, we have shared over R8 million in mutual value with our members.

August is our birthday month and this year we turn 106 years old. To celebrate this milestone, we will be issuing a gift voucher to every person registered on the platform. We plan to distribute in excess of R35 million. So, if you are a member or know anyone who is a member (i.e. has a policy with us), please make sure you register before the end of August 2024 to claim your share of the value.

I hope I have given you some good news to write about! If you need more details, please let me know after the event!

In conclusion, last year I encouraged some of you to participate in our award-winning **AVBOB** Poetry Project. Winners of the 2024 competition will be announced on 18 September 2024. I hope to see some of you amongst the winners!

To everyone here tonight, thank you for joining us. And to all the nominees and winners, a heartfelt congratulations. The stories you tell matter, your voices matter, and your impact is undeniable.

Thank you.