

UCT RAG Day by Estelle Lewak Geva

The excitement of RAG Day! It always took place on a Saturday morning. Going into town with my mum and siblings, nice and early in order to find parking and then looking for a good place to stand amongst the growing crowds gathering on both sides of Adderley Street. The atmosphere was very festive, happy and relaxed. There were those who were lucky to get a good view from the balconies of the various stores and buildings along the route and positioned themselves there waiting.

When my dad's firm moved their offices to Pearl Assurance House on the Foreshore we thought we would have a good view from the third floor windows but it was the end of the procession near the fountains and the statues of Jan and Maria van Riebeeck and one could not feel the vibe and the excitement from up there and a bit too far away. We tried it once and went back to standing in Adderley Street.

What was RAG? The letters stand for "Remember and Give" organization –in the beginning the students of UCT donated all money collected to Groote Schuur Hospital but afterwards the cause was SHAWCO (Students Health and Welfare Centres Organization).

The RAG committee worked for months before the actual day of the happening – planning, finding sponsors to advertise and preparing articles for the satirical RAG magazine SAX APPEAL. For years the main sponsor was PICK 'N PAY (maybe they still are).

RAG week was a tradition – a week when students would build the floats to go on top of open backed trucks all according to a theme chosen each year; costumes were designed and made; a RAG Queen and two Princesses were chosen; the magazine SAX APPEAL was printed and sold at intersections all over the Peninsula by the students. The proceeds from the sale of SAX APPEAL were donated to SHAWCO.

The night before the big day was a mad race to get everything finished and sometimes the students didn't get to sleep at all, working all night till dawn.

It's starting!

One would hear the marching band playing – excitement mounted - we would crane our necks to see the drum majorettes leading the colorful procession. They would march and dance past us in their short white dresses and high white boots, flipping their batons and stepping in time to the music and the shouted instructions from their leader majorette with the long staff.

The first float was usually the float decorated with flowers and a throne for the RAG queen with her two princesses on either side of her in their white gowns and long white gloves and sashes, waving royally to the crowds.

The floats would glide slowly past – each faculty and residence on their float – each float built and decorated by the students who would be jumping and dancing, in costume or in some state of undress, some very drunk too – all waving to us and shaking their collection tins. We would throw our coins at them – coins that missed the floats were picked up off the street by students on foot who would come up to the spectators on the sides of the road, rattling their tins and asking for donations. Some of the male students would dress up as girls wearing skirts and bras and wigs. There was music playing through loudspeakers on each truck.

When I entered my teens I would go to RAG in town with my girlfriends – we would stand on the sidelines (much like we did at rugby matches and for the same reason) and ogle at the dishy "varsity" students – getting such a thrill if one of them actually came up and spoke to us – even if it was only to ask us to put some coins in his collection tin. The thrill of seeing them bare chested with their six packs and long hair was so exciting for us adolescent girls.

The procession would make its way down Adderley Street – stopping now and then, giving people time to admire the handiwork and read the banners and take photos.

At the end of Adderley Street were the fountains and more times than not, students would be thrown in. The newspapers always had a photo of students cavorting in the water

What is strange is that during my time as a student at UCT 1972-1974 I did not take part in the procession. I did sell Sax Appeals. During my first year there I remember doing volunteer work for SHAWCO – once a week I would climb on board the combi and go out to a creche where I would work with young children – for the life of me I cannot remember where it was – Kensington or somewhere in the Cape Flats.

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**Written by Estelle Lewak Geva in Oct 2025**

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