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UCT graduate proves through stubborn determination in the face of adversity anything is possible

After nine long and difficult years, including being academically excluded four times, suffering from bouts of depression, and the birth of his baby girl, Siyabonga Mdlalose recently graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Cape Town (UCT).

The UCT graduation ceremonies commenced on 3 April and will be held until 10 April, with just over 5 200 students graduating. Mdlalose is one of these students.

Hailing from KwaZulu-Natal, Mdlalose came to Cape Town in 2009, having left behind the one-bedroom home he shared with his mother and sister, he was focused on getting an education from UCT and was determined to overcome any obstacles he may face. The first of these came just before he left for Cape Town when he began to experience seizures at night and was advised by his doctor to rethink his course of study.

Mdlalose explains: "Because I was driven by my goals, I couldn't take the doctor's advice. Through God's grace I managed to overcome that troubling condition and until this day I haven't experienced any seizures."

Arriving at UCT alone and with no family, he found himself depressed a lot. For the first few months he stayed at an off-campus accommodation in Athlone before he was able to move closer to Observatory. As a result, he missed out on orientation.

Having transferred to the faculty's Academic Support Programme for Engineering in Cape Town (ASPECT), Mdlalose was able progress with a more 'positive energy' after having struggled at first. ASPECT, which was founded in 1988, is a bridging programme that assists students who matriculate from school systems that have not adequately prepared them for tertiary study.

However, it was not all plain sailing. At times Mdlalose was left feeling left behind and depressed. "I pretended things were alright, I was academically excluded four times. I watched all my friends and former classmates graduating, but I never let it go," he says proudly.

In 2015 Mdlalose had a baby girl he named Summer, after predicting she would bring the light in his life.

A year later, things at UCT took a turn for the better when he shared his struggles with mechanical engineering lecturer Ernesto Ismail. Ismail introduced him to the faculty's marketing and communications manager, Mary Hilton.

Hilton manages the faculty's Student in Distress Fund which was able to assist Mdlalose with money for tuition fees, transport, food, clothes and even support for his baby daughter.

"I left all my pride behind and humbled myself. I was staying in Steenberg, 30 to 35 minutes away from UCT by train. Meeting her [Hilton] was a miracle from God, which I can't even describe. I managed to work hard and pass all my courses in 2016. In 2017 I was a final-year student and worked part-time," he says.

It took nine years of hard graft, but Mdlalose is now a mechanical engineering intern graduate at the Chevron Cape Town Refinery in Milnerton. His advice to struggling students is empathetic but direct: "The journey you are travelling has been travelled before. Your journey may seem very hard and difficult to complete, but if you persist and focus on the end results you will make it."

ENDS

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