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UCT student overcomes odds to be the first post-doctoral graduate in her department

Tafadzwa Mushonga will be the first PhD graduate from the Centre for Environmental Humanities South (CEHS) when she graduates on 14 December at the University of Cape Town (UCT). But her path towards graduation has involved major setbacks. A big blow came early in her academic career when she suffered the loss of her role model, her father. His death in 2006 was followed five years later by the loss of her mother.

Mushonga, who had been unable to visit her mother before she died, was devastated. But, after acknowledging where the losses had taken her, she persevered.

"I could have given up when I lost my parents," she said.

She cites her late father as the one who inspired her the most. He was a science teacher who was appointed as the pioneer principal of the first government school in the Mzarabani District in Zimbabwe in the early 1990s. It was a proud moment in the life of a man nicknamed "Genius" by his peers.

What she wanted was to go where her father had not and reach new academic heights. And that's exactly where she has directed her journey – through sacrifices, and with perseverance and focus.

Her research into the militarisation of conservation was a continuation of her work at Zimbabwe's Forestry Commission. One half of her research on the ground entailed four months with affected communities, the other was spent working with forest guards who patrolled the Hwange National Park in search of illegal activity such as poaching.

For four months, she joined the patrols, travelling some 30 kilometres a day.

"It was risky, but it was interesting, and I learnt a lot."

When she completed high school, Mushonga had her heart set on studying at UCT. She applied in secret, only informing her family when the prospectus arrived.

"My dad just looked at the prospectus and put it aside because obviously he knew we could not afford UCT," she added.

What she wanted was to go where her father had not and reach new academic heights. And that's exactly where she has directed her journey – through sacrifices, and with perseverance and focus.

"I really wish my dad was around to show him I made it to UCT," she said. Fortunately, her paternal grandmother is always reminding her of how she has followed in her father's footsteps.

For now, after so much time apart, Mushonga is looking forward to seeing her 14-year-old daughter who is travelling from Zimbabwe to attend her mother's graduation.

And just like her father, she wants her daughter to push past her own achievements.

"You need to work hard so you can take your children to greater places," concluded Mushonga.

Graduation got under way today, where earlier UCT Chancellor Graça Machel robed Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng. The ceremonies are set to continue tomorrow, 14 December 2018.

Approximately 1885 students will be graduating – including 118 Doctoral and 780 Master's graduands. This will take the total number of students who graduated at UCT this year to over 7000.

DATE AND TIME	FACULTY
13 December 2018 at 18:00	Health Sciences 1; and Law
14 December 2018 at 09:00	Commerce
14 December 2018 at 14:00	Health Sciences 2
14 December 2018 at 18:00	Engineering & the Built Environment; and Science

Visit the [UCT website](#) for more on the December graduation season.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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