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## **Shark survivor graduates with drama degree at UCT**

When a great white shark attacked bodysurfer Caleb Swanepoel at Buffelsbaai near Knysna in June 2015, he thought he was going to die. But a new script was being written for the drama and performance student who graduates on 16 April.

Then a University of Cape Town's (UCT) first-year student, Caleb (20) and his brothers Joshua and Alexander were bodysurfing 80 metres off Murphy's point. He was tiring, hungry, in search of a last wave. As he crested, the shadow of a three-metre great white loomed in the next set.

He screamed a warning to his brothers and they struck out for shore. As he was swimming, he sensed the shark was onto him. It hit with violent force, shaking him like a ragdoll before pulling him under.

"I came up out of the water and, I didn't know at what point, but the shark had taken my leg off and I was floundering in the water," said Swanepoel.

Younger brother Alexander was closest to him. "When he got to me I couldn't swim properly – I was so tired – so he grabbed the back of my wetsuit and started pulling me back to the beach," said Swanepoel.

He'd lost a lot of blood. Surfers on the beach tied a belt around his stump, tourniquet style. Someone called the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI) who were on the scene in 15 minutes. Lifesaving SA and the NSRI South Africa later gave Alexander an award for bravery.

"I thought I wouldn't go back to varsity for a while. I'd have six months off to figure things out, do a course or two and just relax. Get into lazy mode," he said.

At UCT's Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, Swanepoel's course convenor was firm: "We're going to do everything we can to accommodate you, but please, come back."

He has nothing but praise for the centre's staff, led by head of department Associate Professor Geoff Hyland, who rallied around him in the difficult months of his first year.

With Swanepoel about to graduate, senior lecturer Clare Stopford recalled his tenacity.

“His courage paved the way for other differently-abled students in the drama department to join with confidence, while his determination has offered many teachers the opportunity to extend and adapt their skills to teaching differently-bodied students.”

Swanepoel is keen to test himself on the Shakespeare circuit in London – but there are other opportunities. Since the shark attack he’s gone back into the water, excelling at surfing and swimming. He won his division in the International Surfing Association (ISA) Adaptive Surfing Championships and is eyeing the world championships in California.

As a differently-abled swimmer he qualified for Western Province and competed in the national championships in 2016, 2017 and 2018. In 2018 he competed in the long- and short-course championships, medalling in both forms. Now he has his sights set on the Paralympics.

[Download high-resolution picture](#)



Caleb Swanepoel

PIC: Supplied

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