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The juggling act that is motherhood – the challenges and joys of some mothers at UCT

Ahead of Mother's Day on Sunday, 12 May, five members of the University of Cape (UCT) community have shared their inspirational stories, perspectives and unusual motherhood journeys which highlight some of the joys, the challenges and the fulfilling motherhood moments for both old and young mothers in the UCT community.

Some like the UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng are 'deputy mothers' to students and others are responsible for mothering little children of UCT staff and students at the institution's day care centre.

The inspirational stories include that of former SRC member and student activist Naledi Maponopono, who became a mother in her honours year but is on course towards completing her Master's; and Merle Awkes, the food service controller at UCT Leo Marquard Hall who leaves her home in Kuils River at the crack of dawn and makes her way to the all-male residence where she begins her day at 06:00.

Master's and motherhood

Naledi Maponopono became a mother in her honours year. As a postgraduate student in African languages and literature studies at UCT, she was also a member of the SRC and a student activist at the time. Not an insignificant job description. Now a Master of Arts in African Languages candidate, chairperson of the Subwardens Association, the deputy provincial secretary of the Young Communist League Western Cape, and mother to a baby boy, Lubanzi, Maponopono has become even more adept at juggling demands and responsibilities. The meaning of Lubanzi's name has a special significance for his parents; it comes from "*Lubanzi luthando lusinike yena*", which means he was born out of a great deal of love, she said. [Read about Maponopono juggling motherhood demands.](#)

It's more than a job - it's a calling

Buyelwa Caroline Sishuba does more than just teach, she provides a loving environment for the three- to four-year-olds. She is a stand in mother at the UCT's Educare Centre. The centre, which has been described as a microcosm of UCT as it reflects the institution's ethnic and cultural diversity, is a home-from-home for children whose parents are UCT staff and students. She is firm and stern when she needs to be – the naughty

corner is always waiting. But she also applies love and compassion towards each little boy and girl not only in her class, but throughout the school. [Read about Sishuba describing her job as more of a calling.](#)

Mama Merle, mother of Leo Marquard male residence

Merle Awkes, also known as Mama Merle, the food service controller at UCT Leo Marquard Hall, leaves her home in Kuils River at the crack of dawn and makes her way to the all-male residence, where she begins her day at 06:00. Her official work day only starts at 07:00. She goes through the comments book in the dining hall where students leave feedback about the previous day's meals to see if there is anything "her boys" didn't enjoy. "I call them boys and then I remember they are not children anymore," she says. But this is how I feel towards them, like I am the mother figure," she laughed. [Read about how Mama Merle makes sure her boys always have protein and their favourite meal, lasagne. In turn the boys spoil Mama Merle with flowers and chocolate to show their appreciation.](#)

Reflections of a new mother's return to academia

Dr Natasha Vally, a new mother says the understanding that children will sometimes accompany their carers to work should not be taken for granted because it is because of the gains of feminists. She points out that as members of academic staff or postgraduate students in academia, the general understanding is that it is important that there is space for parents (overwhelmingly mothers) to bring their children to the workplace. She argues that it should be fine to bring her small child, still breastfeeding, to a seminar that coincided with the end of my maternity leave. [Read her deeply personal account of returning to academia as a new mother.](#)

The student/mother juggling act

Motherhood is without a doubt a juggling act. While it's universally accepted that mothers have one of the most important and demanding jobs in the world, what happens when they combine this role with another vitally important task? One that involves lectures, assignments and exams. A research paper by UCT master's student and single mother Jill Chidisha Samukimba, titled *Mothers in Academia: Exploring student mothers' experiences of institutional culture within the University of Cape Town*, seeks to answer exactly that question. Samukimba, who is doing her Masters of Philosophy in Development Studies, highlighted the university's growth areas, and the gaps, as she delved into the on-campus environment to determine how inclusive it is for young student mothers. [Read about how balancing parental demands with responsibilities of the degree can be uphill battle.](#)

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