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8 July 2019

Young UCT graduand completes chemical engineering PhD in record time

Malibongwe Manono, who will be graduating with a PhD in chemical engineering from the University of Cape Town (UCT) at the age of just 31, believes that you can overcome anything as long as you set yourself a goal to achieve.

Manono completed his doctorate in just three and a half years, while juggling his roles as lecturer and supervisor to a number of postgraduate students, and after navigating a winding and often bumpy road in the lead-up to this accomplishment. He will graduate on Friday, 12 July.

After completing grades 3 to 9 in Willovale in the Eastern Cape under his grandmother's careful and encouraging watch, Manono returned to Khayelitsha, where he had spent his early years, to finish his last three years at Joe Slovo Engineering High School.

Manono discovered a love for mathematics and physical sciences but his high school only offered these on standard grade. Determined, Manono started studying the two subjects on higher grade, teaching himself outside of the classroom. His teacher, Mnoneleli Mananga, recognised his potential and introduced him to the Scientific and Industrial Leadership Initiative's Saturday classes. He matriculated with 93% for physical science and 87% for mathematics, both on higher grade. With advice from Mananga, he applied to UCT for a BSc.Eng in chemical engineering.

Used to being the top achiever, Manono found himself lost at university in his first semester.

"I think the gap between matric and first year was just too much," he said.

After this bump in the road he recommitted himself to his studies, completed his first year on the Dean's Merit List and was rewarded with a scholarship for his second year, which was another high and saw him closely missing out on a repeat place on the Dean's Merit List.

But in his third year, due to deteriorating health, his lecture attendance dropped below 50% which affected his academic performance. In fourth year, he continued to struggle with low energy and a loss of momentum, but still managed to finish his five-year undergraduate programme.

Upon completion of his degree Manono, as part of his scholarship, was meant to transition to a job at the donor company but due to the economic downturn this did not happen.

The Centre for Minerals Research's Associate Professor Kirsten Corin – who later became Manono's PhD supervisor – offered him a part-time job in a lab and in August 2010, he registered for a two-year master's degree, which he completed within a year.

He joined ArcelorMittal in Saldanha Bay as a candidate engineer in 2011. Two years later, he was formally appointed as an engineer and moved to their Vanderbijlpark plant. From there he applied for a teaching job in the Department of Metallurgical Engineering at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) and in 2015, with the support and encouragement of his head of department, Manono enrolled for his PhD.

In 2016 UCT made him an offer to teach and complete his PhD at the university but this would mean leaving a permanent post for a contract one.

After receiving the offer Manono flew home to Cape Town to celebrate Easter with his family and to ask their advice. It was a trying time as his father had suffered a stroke and was in hospital. He visited his father in the hospital, but he was too ill to speak and slept throughout the visit. Sadly, his father died that night without hearing about the offer from UCT.

Manono said the journey to obtaining his PhD has humbled him and taught him that he can conquer amid challenges. But to do so, there must be a commitment to goals and a realisation that there will be sacrifices.

"I think you can overcome anything, as long as you set yourself a goal to achieve," he said.

After graduation, he will continue supporting undergraduates and postgraduates, pursuing research and putting in the work necessary to become an associate professor in a few years.

ENDS



Malibongwe Manono

Photo: Je'nine May/UCT

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