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## **Transgender UCT graduand reflects on his dysphoria experiences**

When Velile Vilane began his decade-long experience as an undergraduate at UCT, he registered as Miss Velile Vilane. When he stepped into the Sarah Baartman Hall at his graduation ceremony he did so as Mr Vilane. And he left the university as Dr Vilane.

It was at the peak of this research that his dysphoria, the distress some transgender people experience because of the difference between their designated gender and the gender they know they are, became inescapable. He realised that despite his plans to transition after his PhD, his thesis was “not coming out before the other”.

The PhD graduand came into being in the second year of his doctoral journey, his thesis sees the design of an alternative manufacturing route for aircraft that is cheaper but maintains the required specifications.

Vilane grew up on a farm in Swaziland, the second youngest of four children. From a very young age, he had a greater affinity for the stereotypical male roles and found himself constantly at odds with what was expected of him and what he was told should come naturally to him, such as wearing dresses.

The Swazi government does not recognise transgender individuals. As such, Vilane is struggling to obtain a new identity document reflecting his coming into being as a man. Should the Swazi government refuse him, Vilane sees court action as the only other option.

It would certainly not be his first fight for justice nor his first encounter with navigating oppressive systems and structures.

One of the many traumatic experiences Vilane encountered as a trans person at UCT was when and where to use the toilets. The greatest challenge came just before he “transitioned”. When he’d try to use female bathrooms, female students would often

scream. The male toilets were off limits because of the risk of violence, while accessing the disabled toilets often required making a trip from the Menzies Building to the ones near the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library.

It eventually necessitated a "schedule". Vilane found a time to use the toilets when they were as empty as possible – which usually meant going during class time.

The graduand and the rest of the trans community and their allies fought for access to toilets at UCT and now gender-neutral bathrooms are becoming available on campus. Thanks to their persistence, the university has also since amended its policy to enable students to change and choose their gender pronouns.

Reflecting on his coming into being, Velile is now able to smile. He fits perfectly into his clothes, he no longer has to "perform" when he leaves the house and he can finally face himself in the mirror.

He is full of praise for his family's support. While they may not have understood all of it, they supported him throughout. He is also grateful to the Centre for Materials Engineering in which he undertook his PhD while he was coming into being. In particular, Velile thanks his "very good" supervisor Professor Robert Knutsen who managed to secure National Research Foundation funding for him for the duration of his postgraduate studies.

As for his plans, Vilane is already settled in at the Nelson Mandela University's Centre for High Resolution Transmission Electron Microscopy for his postdoctoral fellowship, a continuation of a relationship that was formed during his doctorate.

"The thing is, I have come into being. I know what is happening now; I know how to navigate it," he said.

***ENDS***



Velile Vilane

**Credit:** Je'nine May/UCT

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