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Dodging life's hurdles to attain his masters in chemical engineering



Senzo Mgabhi

Photo: Supplied

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"As long as you're alive, the dream is alive. And remember, it doesn't really matter how you got into the deep end, it's your responsibility to make it to the shore," said University of Cape Town (UCT) MSc graduand Senzo Mgabhi.

Mgabhi will graduate with his master's in chemical engineering from UCT's Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment (EBE) during a virtual graduation celebratory event on Tuesday, 15 December 2020. But his journey to graduation meant that becoming a master jumper was necessary, as he had to dodge life's hurdles to attain success.

"It's been a rough ride; growing up was tough. But faith is the reason I am here today. Faith never let me down," he said.

Mgabhi was born in Mfekayi in Mtubatuba, north of Durban. After his mother's death in 2005, his younger brother, Sanele, and he moved in with their uncles. The move was necessary. Life in Mfekayi was "crime infested and toxic" and moving in with their uncles meant that their living conditions improved. But life was hard, he recalled, and they had very little to get by on.

To support himself and his brother, Senzo picked up a number of odd jobs during the school holidays and eventually over weekends. He used the money to pay their school fees and to buy necessities.

Mgabhi said that he was first introduced to chemical engineering in Grade 10 when his English teacher suggested that he join the school's environmental club. It was during club discussions and debates, often during break and after school, that he was indirectly schooled on some of the basics of chemical engineering.

He knew that getting into university would be tough, and he poured everything into his schoolwork. He performed well in Grade 11, and ahead of his final matric exam he secured a provisional bursary to complete his undergraduate degree in chemical engineering at UCT. His first year got off to a good start. Though challenging, he performed reasonably well throughout the year. But fate stepped in, and on the eve of his final exam he fractured his knee while playing in a residence soccer match. This injury presented a huge setback for his academic performance.

"Because of the injury, I missed most of my October lectures, and as a result I performed poorly in my maths exam that November," he said.

Mgabhi was on the brink of academic exclusion, so he added an additional year to his undergraduate degree. But he forfeited his bursary, which contained strict conditions that the sponsor would not pay for a failed course.

He described his "second first year" as a dark one. He had always been very competitive in the lecture hall, and high academic performance was essential to him and his friends. This, he said, was sometimes good because it motivated them to achieve above-average results. But after his poor performance in his exam the previous year, he said that the pressure associated with always being a top achiever weighed heavily on him.

"I slipped into a depression. I was devastated that I needed to add another year to my degree. I felt like a loser and I carried this burden for several years," he said. But he made a solid commitment to his academic programme. When he wasn't in class, he was in the library studying. During his spare time, he also worked as a student front-desk assistant, computer lab assistant and a student invigilator to settle his outstanding fees. This work didn't get in the way of his studies.

With the support of an EBE faculty psychologist and a strong on-campus support system, he sailed through his undergraduate studies and graduated in 2015. In 2016 Mgabhi decided to pursue his MSc in chemical engineering. He said that he endured some setbacks at the beginning, which included having to change his research topic.

It's been three years and many sleepless nights since then, and he is grateful that he will finally make it onto the virtual stage. He's also in the process of researching PhD

opportunities in the field of sustainable mining, and water and wastewater treatment.

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