



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

11 December 2020

Two hip surgeries and constant pain no deterrent for PhD candidate



Takunda Chikata
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Photo: Candice Lowin

Takunda Chitaka is no stranger to the challenges that life can present along the way or success and will be graduating with her PhD in Chemical Engineering from the University of Cape Town (UCT) this month.

Chitaka was one of 10 emerging scientists to receive the Blue Charter fellowship from The Association of Commonwealth Universities last year and was also the first recipient of the [Excellence in Academia PETCO Award](#) for research she had been working on since 2016.

Her PhD thesis is titled "Inclusion of leakage into lifecycle management of products involving plastic as a material choice", in which she argues that litter should be included in the lifecycle management of plastic products.

For the past few years Chitaka has been walking the beaches around Cape Town, conducting surveys to estimate the amount of litter that flows into the marine environment and explore how this knowledge can influence development of strategies and interventions. The physical tasks like picking up litter from beaches and the painstaking analysis of what was recovered from the shores, meant the flare-up of an old injury could have been devastating. She broke her hip when she was 11 and was told she would have constant pain.

She consulted a doctor who told her she needed a hip replacement, which she couldn't afford. Faced with the prospect of not being able to walk properly or do any physical work, she refused to give in to the physical pain or the mental uncertainty.

"So we decided to crowdfund and the stars aligned."

Her supervisor Professor Harro Von Blottnitz drove the fundraising effort himself – from the heart. "I'm not a quiet person professionally, but personally I like to keep everything to myself. I don't think I've ever felt that supported in my life. People really rallied around and said, 'This girl needs to get surgery, let's help her'. My surgery was fully paid for, crowdfunded, which I still think is wild!"

A month later she was presenting a PhD proposal, having just recovered from the operation. "I insisted, and I went for it and it didn't go well. There was scepticism about a chemical engineer dabbling into plastic pollution and marine studies," she said. Her proposal was sent back for revision.

In 2017 she attended an international conference where she presented in a competition for PhD projects, and finished second. With that experience, Chitaka gained the confidence she needed to have another attempt at representing her PhD proposal – and it was accepted.

All of a sudden her life got very busy – from lecturing to being involved with the faculty's student council to doing beach surveys. "I realised you can plan all you want for life but things don't always go according to plan. There are so many opportunities in life; when an opportunity comes, don't just let it go past you just because you've already got a plan," she said.

"Through randomly studying towards my master's, I discovered my passion. If I hadn't been an engineer because of my dad, I wouldn't have gone on to do my master's. I want to learn from every experience, and find new experiences, so I put my hand up for random things that sound like fun. What do I have to lose? But I will be enriched."

But life's challenges were never far away. Even after her hip surgery, she had debilitating pain. She needed a second surgery. "I didn't tell a lot of people that I went for the second surgery because I didn't want to disappoint them. I got the second surgery – and it didn't work. I still have chronic pain until this day."

There was no time to rest. Chitaka was selected for a fellowship in New Zealand in 2019. She gritted her teeth and decided that, in spite of the pain, she would give it her all.

"I went to my doctor and said, 'Write me a script.' I packed about six months' worth of pain medication in my suitcase. Am I supposed to stop living my life because my body hates me? No, it must get on board," she said.

"Life is hard, but then you don't throw out the baby with the bathwater," she said. "You persevere; you have to be positive for yourself. Your inner voice has to be positive. You have to say, 'Life sucks right now, but I'm going to keep going.' Look at where you're going. Don't dwell on where you've come from."

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Aamirah Sunday

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5427
Cell: (076) 947 6071

Email: aamirah.sunday@uct.ac.za

Website: www.uct.ac.za