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Overcoming anxiety and depression to graduate in chemical engineering



Tinéo Galela

Photo: Supplied

On 13 July, Tinéo Galela will graduate virtually with her BSc in chemical engineering from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment (EBE). Graduation marks the culmination of a few years of sacrifice, sleepless nights, and nail-biting moments. It signals the start of the rest of her life; and the university she has come to know and love has set a strong foundation for what's to come.

Tinéo's association with UCT started when she was just a young girl, in Grade 8 at Eunice High School in Bloemfontein. She still recalls the day her teacher handed her an EBE brochure, which contained the need-to-knows for completing an engineering degree at UCT.

"At 13 years old, I knew that I wanted to be an engineer. Some would call that crazy – what does a 13-year-old know? But I knew; and that brochure kept my dream of studying at UCT alive," she said.

Can-do attitude

Tinéo kept her eye on the prize and her nose in her books. Her teachers supported her academic efforts and nurtured her can-do attitude. Nothing was more important than performing well at school. More than that, she was always on the lookout for opportunities outside of school that would increase her chances of receiving a university bursary.

"I spent so much of my high school career networking. I knew that I needed a bursary," she said.

"But I also wanted to learn as much as I possibly could about engineering. I asked questions; I read a lot. I wanted to absorb everything like a sponge."

In Grade 9 she joined a job-shadowing programme organised by Transnet Rail Engineering, and in Grade 11 she participated in the annual Sasol Science Olympiad – and pulled out all the stops. The reward was a trip to the Drakensberg to learn more about Sasol and careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Towards the end of her matric year Sasol offered her a full bursary to study chemical engineering at UCT. And at the beginning of 2016, she made the journey to Cape Town to start her first year.

Imposter syndrome

Shortly after she arrived at UCT, her excitement vanished; the environment was unlike anything she had expected. Adjusting to university life was tough, and navigating the new environment was challenging too.

"I suffered from a very bad case of imposter syndrome. I was in a dark place and didn't really know how to get out of there," she said.

To make matters worse, at the time, the higher education sector was gripped by the #FeesMustFall protests; and UCT, like many other universities in the province and in the country, was at the centre of it all.

After a tug of war with herself, Tinéo attended her first therapy session with a faculty psychologist, and she was diagnosed with anxiety and depression. But things got worse before they got better. Sadly, her depression escalated in her second year. She struggled to manage her course load, and deferred her exams to January 2018.

In a twist of fate, she took ill a week before her exams, but was determined to write regardless. She was afraid that if she didn't, she might lose her bursary. Unfortunately, she failed two subjects and lost a total of 64 credits.

"That was the worst feeling in the world for me. I also got word that my bursary would be suspended for a year. I felt like a total failure," Tinéo said.

The final hurdle

The end was in sight. Tinéo was excited to complete her final year, until the COVID-19 pandemic hit South Africa's shores in March 2020. It presented yet another curveball on her academic journey.

“In 2020 I realised that physical resources actually mean very little without your peers. It took a pandemic for me to realise just how important they all were to me,” she said.

She said her class was tasked with completing difficult design projects while scattered across the country. This was a tough task, as all students and their families were directly affected by the pandemic and its economic impact.

She also returned to therapy in the second half of 2020 – which, she pointed out, gave her the courage to complete the final hurdle of her academic journey. It also equipped her with lifelong skills in managing conflict and situations that are out of her control.

“It was my responsibility and mine alone to finish what 13-year-old me had once dreamed of. The road was long, and sometimes it was quite lonely; but I am so happy to be walking away with my degree today,” she said.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News

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