



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

14 December 2021

UCT engineering graduate overcomes imposter syndrome and ill health

For Reitumetse Kholumo, achieving her degree in chemical engineering from the University of Cape Town (UCT) was a life goal. And as one of the Free State's top 100 matric pupils in 2015, her admission to UCT was practically guaranteed.

Once she reached campus and began her academic programme, that goal felt unattainable. But she persevered, and after several stops and starts along the way, countless deferred exams and an extended degree as a result of her ill health, Kholumo has finally reached the finish line.

On 14 December 2021 she will join hundreds of other UCT graduands as they take to a virtual stage during a jam-packed summer graduation season. "I've always dreamed of hearing my mother's and grandmother's reverberating ululations from their seats in Sarah Baartman Hall as I am about to be hooded. I'm disappointed that I won't get this opportunity, but I'm ecstatic that I'll finally be graduating. It's been wild," Kholumo said.

When Kholumo arrived at UCT in 2016 she was in for a rude awakening. The once confident teenager felt like she didn't belong there; she struggled to make the school-to-university transition, and to meet the demands of her academic programme.

"This was quite difficult to admit because I was always very confident, and I was able to adapt well to any given situation. I'd like to think that I've always been resilient. But not this time," she said.

Despite experiencing imposter syndrome, Kholumo decided to focus on her studies. Even though the course load was huge, and nothing was more daunting than asking a question in a packed lecture hall, she promised to give it her everything. After all, she always wanted to study chemical engineering and have a hand in solving some of the world's most complex problems.

Her resilience and her faith in herself and her ability to succeed were tested when she failed her first physics and maths test. "That was a very harsh moment for me. Before that I'd never failed a single test in my life and always prided myself on my good grades. I felt so ashamed; so small," Kholumo said.

But the Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment's (EBE) mentorship programme provided her with the assistance she needed to navigate this phase of her student life. Guided by a mentor who had been in her shoes before, she said she learned to embrace failure as part of her journey and she put in every effort to improve and produce better grades.

"For me, key to this process was learning to understand that I am neither defined by my failures or my successes as I transcend them both. This was a huge change in perspective because my identity had been grounded in being a top academic achiever. Now, I simply place more importance on doing the best I can in every moment," she said.

But things got worse before they got better. Following a personal traumatic event in 2017, Kholumo was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. And after what felt like just a few minutes, in 2018 she was also diagnosed with fibromyalgia – a chronic condition that causes excessive muscle pain, fatigue and cognitive disturbances. Sadly, the diagnosis and its effects also led to her depression.

Kholumo made the tough but necessary decision to decrease her course load and extend her degree. She also registered with UCT's Disability Service and was accommodated accordingly. The fibromyalgia drastically affected Kholumo's ability to perform everyday tasks, including attending lectures. On the days that her symptoms flared up badly, it was impossible to concentrate on anything but managing the pain.

"It's been a harrowing journey. I've lost count of how many exams I deferred since 2017. And there were also times when I forced myself to endure the pain just to get the exam done and out of the way," she said.

"I am so excited and relieved that it's all done, and my family is doing the happy dance too. They walked this long road with me," she said.

Kholumo's journey as an undergraduate student has taught her more lessons than she ever thought was possible – the biggest one, she said, is to be kind to yourself regardless of what comes your way.

As she prepares to transition into this new phase of her life, she said she has big plans, and a career in bioprocess engineering is definitely part of it. She plans to start her master's in 2022 and build on her honour's research, which focused on sustainably producing bioactive compounds from indigenous plants. This work also earned her a distinction.

She is sad to say goodbye – to the picturesque campus and her friends, but especially to her lecturers in the faculty who she has come to love and who have played an instrumental role in getting her to graduation day.

"Yes, I'm sad to say goodbye. But I'm also so happy that I'm finally in a position to actually say goodbye," she chuckled. "It's been a ride of a lifetime. But as Maya Angelou once said: 'You may not control the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them'."



Reitumetse Kholumo

Photo: Supplied

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Aamirah Sondag

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

Email: aamirah.sondag@uct.ac.za

Website: www.uct.ac.za