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An academic by day and actress by night - finance lecturer gets full professorship



Professor Gizelle Willows

Photo: Lerato Maduna

To most people, drama and accounting may seem like two poles at opposite ends of the academic spectrum. However, for Professor Gizelle Willows the pursuit of both these passions has led to finding a niche in behavioural finance as well as attaining a number of career highlights. Most recently, she was promoted ad hominem to full professor at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) College of Accounting.

This promotion means that, apart from Emeritus Professor Alex Watson, Professor Willows is currently the only professor in the college. "It's been quite a journey," she said. "I've always straddled two careers: I'm an academic in Commerce during the day and an

actress on stage at night. While those might sound like complete opposite interests, they're surprisingly quite complementary."

Willows' interest in academia was first sparked when she started tutoring accounting part-time at Varsity College to supplement her meagre income as a full-time actress. Prior to this, she had qualified and started working as a chartered accountant, but quickly realised it was not for her.

It was while tutoring one evening that she had a career-defining and life-changing epiphany. "I suddenly realised that tutoring is actually just like acting. The only difference is that there's a full house every night," she chuckled.

Prompted by this realisation, she applied for a lecturing position at UCT in 2011 and got the job.

Invaluable lessons from the stage

"Now, I'm not saying that as academics we should be entertainers. No way!" Willows pointed out. "But I am saying that the skills I learned in my theatre training were easily transferrable to teaching. Things like voice projection, reading a crowd, thinking on my feet, etc."

Importantly, this unusual convergence of interests also led to her finding her academic niche.

Willows explained that while studying drama, you learn what it means to be human, how to translate different characteristics onto different humans and, most importantly, how to listen. "It's given me a solid foundation and awareness of how each of us are very different," she said. "So, now you combine my technical accounting and finance degrees with my understanding of human nature, and bang – you've got behavioural finance!"

Within this field of research, Willows is particularly interested in the way it relates to personal finance and retirement savings.

She has published over 42 research articles and been the recipient of multiple best paper awards. Within the College of Accounting at UCT, she is the programme convenor for the Master of Commerce specialising in Financial Reporting, Analysis and Governance as well as the PhD programme. Furthermore, Willows is the leader of the [Behavioural Finance and Accounting \(BFA\)](#) international research group.

Her behavioural and personal finance insights are in high demand as attested by invitations to give keynote addresses, be an expert guest on international podcasts, and her widely read blog, [Nudging Financial Behaviour](#).

Reaching a wider audience

"Starting the blog was really just a culmination and dissemination of everything my research had taught me," said Willows.

She added that it also grew out of a desire to share her work beyond the relatively insular sphere of academic journals. "I fear that as academics we get very focused on publishing our work in academic journals only," Willows explained. "It's an important thing to do, but because my research is so practically relevant and the findings can positively impact

financial behaviour – at least in my opinion – I wanted the information to reach anyone and everyone.”

As with any new online platform, it took a while for the blog to gain traction. However, soon enough, it gathered a small following that grew into a dedicated and ever-growing community. As a result, Willows is in high demand as a public speaker as well as a professional consultant.

“The engagement I get on the work I put out there really shows me that it makes a difference,” she said. “My research is not only being read by other academics, but also being put into practice and influencing the financial industry in South Africa.”

Send that email

In terms of other highlights, Willows said that one of the defining moments in her academic career was the time she spent as a visiting scholar at the Haas School of Business at the University of California (Berkeley) under the mentorship of Professor Terrance Odean.

The opportunity came along when Willows had a six-month sabbatical lined up before starting her PhD. Unsure how to fill this half-year, she decided to reach out to Professor Odean, a scholar whose work she had long admired, to find out if he knew about any opportunities she could harness during this time.

“I honestly expected to get a ‘This email address does not exist’ or no response at all,” she recalled. “But 20 minutes later I had a response thanking me for getting in touch and telling me about a short visiting scholarship programme that I could apply for!”

Some serious fundraising efforts later, she was on a flight to San Francisco and headed for Berkeley. “I think we often assume that the big names are untouchable,” Willows said. “But they’re not. They’re just as willing to give back, to mentor and to help develop junior academics.”

This is also one of the big lessons she shares with her students: never hesitate to get in touch with the academics and authors you admire. “Who knows what fruit that connection might yield in the future?”

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