



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

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Exceptional KwaZulu-Natal physics teacher wins UCT 2022 Stella Clark Award

Using tangible examples to teach a complex subject like physics – in a resource-constrained school to a class of matric learners who have continuously underperformed in the subject – is no simple task. But for Nonkululeko Sibisi, the recipient of the 2022 Stella Clark Teachers' Award, who epitomises servant leadership, compassion and patience, this unique teaching methodology is second nature.

An emotional Sibisi received her award from the University of Cape Town (UCT) Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng during a virtual award ceremony on Monday, 25 July.

The Stella Clark Teachers' Award honours the legacy of Stella Clark, who was a language development lecturer in UCT's Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED). The award recognises teachers' outstanding contributions to their craft and their unwavering commitment to their pupils' lives, despite difficult circumstances in resource-constrained settings in South Africa.

Every year, the Stella Clark Teachers' Award Committee calls on students to nominate excellent teachers who have made a difference in their lives.

This year, Samkelo Nyawose's nomination blew the committee away. The final-year business science student in UCT's Faculty of Commerce provided a captivating motivation on what sets Sibisi apart from other teachers in her field. Sibisi was a physics teacher at Ogwini Comprehensive Technical High School in Umlazi in KwaZulu-Natal and taught Nyawose physics in matric. He said her teaching technique made a lasting impression on his life.

"Physical science is one of the most challenging subjects in high school, and in my high school, it was one of the subjects with the lowest pass rate. Although we found the subject challenging, Ms Sibisi always tried to ease our challenges with her unique teaching style," Nyawose said.

A cut above the rest

When Sibisi entered Nyawose's matric class as their new physics teacher, learners were struck by her one-of-a-kind teaching methodology, her love and passion for the subject, and the manner in which she interacted with her pupils.

Prior to her arrival, for all learners in his class, a distinction in physics was merely a dream. But Sibisi made every effort to change that. Extra classes after school and on weekends to help learners revise and consolidate the week's class work, and regular in-class spot tests to test learners' knowledge as they worked through various textbook chapters, became the norm. The latter technique, Nyawose explained, helped Sibisi to identify where the gaps were, and the number of learners who needed extra attention. Those learners then received one-on-one sessions during break time.

Importantly, Sibisi had the innate ability to break down complex content meticulously using sound explanations and reasoning and incorporated real-life applications of physics theory into her teaching strategy. Her commitment to her learners and their hard work paid off. Nyawose said at the end of his matric year, several of his peers (himself included) attained A+ and B aggregates for the subject, two learners even recorded a whopping 98% – a monumental accomplishment which had never been achieved before. Sibisi's influence also extended beyond the classroom. Nyawose said she acted as a mother figure to all her learners and provided them with the encouragement and motivation they needed to excel in school in order to further their studies at university.

"These teaching methods made a big difference and there were big improvements in our results. She had our best interest at heart and treated us as her own children. We were safe in her hands," Nyawose said. "She was more than just a teacher to me and encouraged me never to give up – whatever the challenges may be."

Simplifying science

Yet, Sibisi maintains that her teaching model is not rocket science. Instead, she explained, it is built on simplifying science and ensuring that the syllabus is relatable and accessible to all learners in her class. Essentially, she added, her technique always aims to foster critical thinking and a problem-solving mindset among learners.

"By all means I try to simplify my teaching. I don't make it easy; I make it doable and fun. Yes, textbooks are there, but science is around us. Yes, textbooks are there, but education is around us and education is supposed to build character," she said.

Celebrating excellence

Addressing the audience, Phakeng said the Stella Clark Teachers' Award has helped UCT to build important relationships with schools all over the country. She said teachers play an important role in preparing learners for the rigorous academic life that they can expect at UCT. Yet, she added, some regard teaching as an easy job, but those sentiments could not be further from the truth. She told Sibisi and other attendees that being a teacher is not just about attaining a degree and getting a job; it's about helping people to realise their full potential.

"Ms Sibisi is clearly not just a teacher of physics, but a teacher of character. Excellent teachers don't just cover the curriculum and they don't just steal minds with knowledge; excellent teachers help to shape new adults and citizens who will go into the world and change it," Phakeng said.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News.



Ms Nonkululeko Sibisi

Photo: Supplied

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison Assistant
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za