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Stella Clark Teachers' Award: UCT recognises two 'extraordinary' teachers



Winners of the Stella Clark Teachers' Award, Aphiwe Mpahleni and Bulisa Dyushu-Gophe (centre), flanked by their nominators Thabisa Sagela (left) and Asivile Mphokeli (right), pictured with award sponsor Jamala Safari from the HCI Foundation (far right).
Photo: Lerato Maduna

In the spirit of celebrating extraordinary women this Women's Month, it is apt that two Cape Town teachers were named joint recipients of the 2023 Stella Clark Teachers' Award – in recognition of their service, sacrifice and dedication to their pupils, and commitment to their craft.

Bulisa Dyushu-Gophe, an economics and accounting teacher at Makupula Secondary School in Stellenbosch; and Aphiwe Mpahleni, a dance teacher at Zonnebloem Nest High School in Walmer Estate, received their awards from University of Cape Town (UCT) Vice-Chancellor (interim) Emeritus Professor Daya Reddy on Monday, 21 August.

Thanks to the nominations submitted by two UCT students – Asivile Mphokeli and Thabisa Sagela – Dyushu-Gophe and Mpahleni share the 2023 honour. 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' contributions to this crucial discipline and their commitment to their pupils' lives, despite difficult circumstances in resource-constrained settings in South Africa.

"I am privileged to have known Stella Clark, and the award reflects so very well everything she stood for, worked for and lived for. The impact of her work was felt, especially among students whose social and educational backgrounds would've made it that much more difficult for them to succeed but in whom she saw the potential and also the will to succeed," Reddy said.

A practical approach

Annually, the Stella Clark Teachers' Award committee calls on UCT students to nominate exemplary teachers who have made a difference in their lives. And this year it was difficult to choose just one awardee because Mphokeli and Sagela both submitted compelling nominations depicting their ideal teachers.

Mphokeli, a Bachelor of Social Science student, described Dyushu-Gophe's teaching methodology as practical and comprehensive. Her goal is to help pupils familiarise themselves with concepts that are not well understood, and this approach helps to build a gradual foundation of knowledge for her subjects. Her passion for teaching even extends into the weekend during which Dyushu-Gophe provides pupils with extra lessons, as well as snacks to keep energy levels high. Thanks to her influence and support, many students are enrolled at universities and pursuing various degrees.

"There are so many principles I have learned from her and applied in my own personal life. She has always inculcated a sense of responsibility, diligence and courage among her learners. She has taught me that if you put your mind to something that you want to achieve and actually work towards achieving that goal, you will indeed achieve it," Mphokeli said.

Passion for the craft

In her nomination, Sagela, an honours in education student, said Mpahleni is passionate about her work, her pupils and the school she serves, and creates a stimulating in-class environment where everyone can thrive.

She said Mpahleni uses various teaching methodologies to help pupils foster an understanding and passion for dance. She encourages pupils to express their creativity by participating in practical workshops, choreography projects, dance performances and recitals, which she hosts. And she also ensures that her pupils are regularly exposed to successful artists in the industry to demonstrate their success and expand pupils' horizons. Mpahleni believes in the power of collaboration as a way of developing a sense of community among pupils.

"Ms Mpahleni has demonstrated a remarkable commitment to encouraging students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to register at UCT. Through her inclusive teaching approach, personalised support and mentorship, she has acted as a true role model for her pupils," Sagela said. "She empowers them to overcome obstacles and pursue their dreams.

Her contributions have not only made a significant impact on the lives of individual pupils but have also contributed to creating a more diverse and inclusive academic community at UCT.”

‘A divine responsibility’

Of her award, Dyushu-Gophe said she’s humbled, and thrilled that her work has been recognised. She thanked Mphokeli for the nomination and reminded the audience that she has just been doing her job and expected nothing in return.

Dyushu-Gophe said South Africa’s education sector is faced with a myriad of challenges, such as unemployment, teenage pregnancies and substance abuse. These challenges, she added, lead to early high school dropout rates among pupils and an exodus of teachers from the profession. To work around them, Dyushu-Gophe said teachers need to develop a unique approach that suits everyone in the class. And it’s for this reason that she strives to create a harmonious atmosphere in the classroom, where she works alongside her pupils. With this partnership, she said, she has witnessed remarkable outcomes – a win-win situation – for the teacher and pupils.

“Being entrusted with the privilege of shaping young minds is a blessing beyond measure. It’s a divine responsibility that I hold close to my heart and I understand the weight of the role I play in moulding young minds,” she said. “God has granted me the power to influence, to uplift and to inspire. With every word that I utter, I have the potential to break and build souls. And I have chosen to dedicate myself fully to this noble task – a path illuminated by my faith and commitment to serve.”

‘It’s not a banking system’

Addressing the audience, which included pupils from both schools and the Stella Clark Teachers’ Award committee, Mpahleni recognised several influential scholars over time, including Robert Sobukwe and Steve Biko, who have made a significant contribution to South Africa’s education discourse, and who have inspired her teaching methodology.

She said she discourages teaching merely from a textbook. Instead, she believes in finding vital pathways where pupils can implement what they’ve learned in theory, by putting it into practice in the real world. In addition, she said, she supports an education system that recognises values, culture, heritage and lived experiences.

“We are not teaching a banking system where we can deposit information and withdraw it. We need to find ways where kids can find relevance in the material we teach them. And if it’s set in a particular way, where can they find their own voices within it? It’s up to us as teachers to show them those links,” Mpahleni said. “It’s against this backdrop that I have laid my foundation of teaching and learning because when I go into the classroom, I learn from my kids so that I can serve them as best as I can.”

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