

UNIZULU researchers awarded prestigious scholarships

NALEDI HLEFANE

TWO University of Zululand (UNIZULU) researchers have been awarded the prestigious Fulbright South African Research Scholar Programme (SARSP) scholarship, which will afford them the opportunity to interact and collaborate with respected academics.

SARSP provides South African scholars (university academics and research institute professionals) with an opportunity to undertake research in a specified field of expertise at a US academic or research institution for a three to nine-month period. The opportunity is intended to help advance curricula at the funded candidate's home institution.

Professor Evelyn Madoroba, an associate professor at the Department of Biochemistry and Microbiology, and Dr Derek Fish, who directs the university's Science Centre, feel honoured to be considered from the KwaZulu-Natal pool of applications for this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"It is a tremendous honour and a great responsibility to represent UNIZULU overseas. I am certainly looking forward to being mentored by established leaders in my field and having a chance to work at the highest level. I am also excited about what I will be able to bring back to South Africa to benefit our country and UNIZULU. I am also very involved with the SA



Dr Derek Fish

Science Centre and Physics networks, and will use these to disseminate knowledge and skills gained overseas," says Dr Fish.

The science enthusiast, who has over 30 years' experience in the science cen-



Professor Evelyn Madoroba

tre space, has chosen to work alongside Prof John Falk who is based in Corvallis, Oregon. Prof Falk is a leader in free-choice learning, with multiple publications on topics ranging from the essence of muse-

ums and the knowledge that can be gained from visiting such sites to the impact of free-choice learning. Dr Fish looks up to Prof Falk and he considers this opportunity to work closely with him and his wife Lynn Dierking a privilege. He will alternate between Prof Falk's Institute for Learning Innovation and Oregon State University.

For Prof Madoroba, the award signifies that the nature of her scholarly work as an academic and a microbiologist is worth recognition.

"My research focuses on understanding antimicrobial resistance in pathogenic bacteria, and bio prospecting for potential novel antimicrobial compounds from marine environments. Antibiotic resistance is a global challenge. It makes treating and managing infections very challenging – hence bio prospecting for new sources of drugs is important," she says.

Through this scholarship, she anticipates working with highly-regarded experts on antimicrobial resistance and microbial genomics at US institutions. She also hopes that the "life changing experience" will enable her to share the knowledge she will gain with students at UNIZULU, as well as contribute to the national scarce skills.

Prof Madoroba intends departing for the US in August. Dr Fish, on the other hand, will be leaving on January 16, 2023 – his birthday.

Tshiovhe obtains Master's degree despite visual impairment

PRECIOUS SHAMASE

MICHAEL Takalani Tshiovhe, a University of Zululand (UNIZULU) Master's graduate, did not allow his visual impairment to get in the way of achieving his dream.

Born in Mandala village, Limpopo, he started schooling at Fondwe Primary School. In 1980, when he was in Grade 5, he unfortunately contracted an eye disease that led to him losing his eyesight. He was thereafter admitted to a special school where he was taught Braille, and had to start his primary schooling afresh.

He completed high school at Philadelphia Secondary School in Pretoria. After matric, he studied towards a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Venda, before obtaining his Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) and Bachelor of Education Honours in Inclusive Education at the University of South Africa.

His thirst for teaching and passion for imparting knowledge prompted his pursuit of a career in education.

"From a young age, I always wanted to be a teacher so that I could assist learners with learning barriers and how they can be assisted," he explains.

According to Tshiovhe, his greatest inspiration has been his family, who has always encouraged him to keep himself occupied.

"Seeing my wife complete her PhD made me aware that I can also do it. My children challenged me when they excelled up to university level. Some of my colleagues with visual impairment who studied further, also inspired me. Having supportive colleagues and supervisors made me aware that there were no excuses and to use any opportunity to do something that can benefit others."

For his Master's, Tshiovhe was supervised by UNIZULU lecturer Professor



Philip Kutame, who was as equally excited about the achievement.

"I feel proud that I have produced a student of Tshiovhe's calibre, who is so dedicated and always on time with submissions. I acknowledge how hard he has worked to accomplish this degree. He converted the reading material to Braille and vice versa, and managed to present (his work) with those gadgets that seemed a wonder to some, though just normal to him," said Prof Kutame.

He added that Tshiovhe never complained when asked to submit certain chapters, nor did he miss a contact session, despite having to travel 930km from Fondwe to the Richards Bay Campus. "He told me that he is now ready to start with his PhD. I have no doubt that the knowledge he has gained will enlighten those who may not understand teaching in an inclusive class. The diligence, hard work and perseverance will make him taste the fruits of academic success."

Tshiovhe advises those living with a disability to not necessarily focus on that disability. He believes that students should continue concentrating on their studies irrespective of their disability, as this increases one's chances of securing bigger and better opportunities.

Campus security guard obtains Bachelor of Education degree

PRECIOUS SHAMASE

THE enchantment of walking across the stage in graduation attire and looking into the crowd to see the faces of family, colleagues and friends beaming with pride, was a lifelong dream that became a reality for Zethembe Chili – a full-time security guard at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU).

The 50-year-old obtained his Bachelor of Education (Intermediate and Senior Phase) degree, with majors in isiZulu and social sciences, during the 2022 UNIZULU graduation week. Now a qualified teacher, it is only a matter of time before Chili secures his dream job.

"I broke the curse in my family, as I was the first to graduate. I told myself: After me, there will be no uneducated person in my home," he said.

Chili hails from KwaNdaya Reserve in Esikhaleni, Empangeni. He is among several UNIZULU service employees who seized the opportunity to utilise the University's study benefit for staff, which includes, among other perks, spousal funding. He also encouraged his wife to grab the opportunity to study within the institution as well and she is now a qualified teacher.

When one considers the long and windy road he had to travel to date, it is fitting to call Chili an inspiration. He entered primary school at the age of 11, as he was a herd boy tending to his grandfather's cattle. Recognising his brilliance, his primary school teachers made him write a special exam that qualified him to skip Sub-B (now called Grade 2) and go straight to standard one (Grade 3).

At that time, when pupils had progressed to senior primary, they attended a formal graduation ceremony. When his mother could not afford to pay the R15 that was required for him to hire a graduation gown and buy a new outfit for the day, Chili sadly missed his first-ever graduation. Since the ceremony took place on a Saturday, he decided to take the cattle near the school so that he could watch from a distance.

He had excelled above all his class-



mates. Hearing his name called out as the top learner, yet unable to fully relish the moment, left a huge scar.

Poverty would continue in its attempts to throw Chili off course – but gradually he would find a way of pushing through the odds stacked against him. With each experience, he grew wiser and more ambitious. He first worked as a gardener for one of the principals who took him in. He would only go home on weekends. Whenever the house help was off duty, he would be asked to hold the fort.

While in Grade 11, he worked part-time at the local Lutheran church as the pastor's driver and stylist, while also

assisting with other chores in the church. He survived on tips received from the congregation.

Thereafter, he began his career as a security guard, which subsequently saw him working as a permanent employee of the Protection Services Department at UNIZULU.

The journey to the graduation stage came at a huge price as Chili had to juggle his studies, work and family life, while also dealing with other life challenges.

"I don't take this accomplishment for granted," he said, adding that he hopes his story will help inspire others, including his colleagues, some of whom

may not yet comprehend the value of advancing their studies.

"None of these officers grew up aspiring to be security guards, but the circumstances that many black people grew up in prevented us from achieving our childhood dreams," he said.

Chili's mother unfortunately passed away in 2021. As it was always her wish to see him graduate, the graduate shared that on the night before his graduation, he hung his graduation gown in his late mother's room. This was Chili's way of expressing his gratitude to his mom and showing her that he had indeed finally "made it".

Truck driver steers his way towards a BCom degree

NALEDI HLEFANE

THE past four years have been a true test of character for Bayanda Buthelezi, who was juggling two roles – a full-time student and part-time truck driver.

It was not until he obtained his BCom degree in Economics and Human Resources Management at the recent University of Zululand (UNIZULU) graduation that he took full cognisance of how worthwhile his sacrifice had been.

The Mpumalanga-born Buthelezi began his studies in 2018, following an involuntary hiatus after completing matric in 2013. The opportunity to study came shortly after he had found employment as a truck driver for a Durban-based logistics company towards the end of 2017.

"My NSFAS funding matter was not sorted out until August in my first year; I had only managed to get accommodation at one of the university's residences. By the grace of God, my employer in the logistics company offered me a part-time position, which I gladly accepted. I would work on some weekends and during university holidays," said Buthelezi.

The income from the odd jobs assisted him with purchasing necessities such as food and toiletries. Once the stipend from the student funding scheme was activated, his income helped at home as well.

Buthelezi describes himself as a hardworking individual, who aims to see every project he starts to fruition. It was having this mindset that kept him motivated to study, more especially after the higher education sector was plunged into virtual learning by the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure he was never behind on his schoolwork, he carried his study material wherever he travelled.

"I was working a lot more during the virtual learning period, but my studies were always top priority. There are truck stops along the way, so whenever I had classes to attend or assignments to work on, I would do that there."

He formed a study group with fellow



students, which included his close friends Sboniso Mdlletshe, Goodman Mabaso and Nozibuso Ngema. Together, they shared knowledge and held discussions on a chat messaging platform. Forming this alliance is an experience he will forever cherish, as it led him to his intended destination. "That moment on stage felt surreal. I would have celebrated with a dance had I not been so shy," he laughed. "I also became teary thinking about my background and what I had sacrificed to get to this stage."

Buthelezi's childhood story is "complex", and he is therefore not yet comfortable revisiting the events. He revealed that he was taken in by a local woman named Sabeth Gininda when he was in Grade 11. Though she lives from hand to mouth, Gogo, as Buthelezi affectionately calls her, welcomed the young man with open arms. It meant the world to him to mark his milestone with Gogo by his side. For Buthelezi, obtaining his degree is a promise of working less hours and earning a better income. While he has not secured employment in his profession, he remains hopeful that he will get the opportunity to make his mark in the human resources space.

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