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UCT graduate overcomes three death tragedies to achieve excellence

After losing his father, brother-in-law and close friend in just over a month in his final year of undergraduate study, University of Cape Town (UCT) student Siphon Mbadaliga was unsure if he would be able to complete his degree. But through perseverance and hard work, Mbadaliga will be graduating with a Bachelor of Business Science specialising in finance and accounting this April.

Coming from a small community in Madombidzha, Limpopo, university meant more than just a degree to him. "When I came to university, I came with the aim of making my parents and community proud. This is what really pushed me to try and excel academically, while also involving myself in leadership positions," he said.

Having scored seven distinctions in matric in 2013, Mbadaliga continued to excel at UCT, where he became part of the Dean's Merit List and the Golden Key International Honour Society (being in the top 15% of achievers in his degree).

In the first semester of his final year, he received heart-breaking news: his otherwise healthy father, a teacher, had suddenly passed away.

"It was the worst day of my life. What really hurt most was the fact that he was going to attend my graduation. That was one of the last things we spoke about. He sacrificed a lot in order for me to be where I am today. I made a promise to myself that I would dedicate every sweat and tear in pursuit of this degree to him. I am therefore dedicating this degree to my father, in honour of his legacy. It is not mine, but his," Mbadaliga emphasised.

About a month later his brother-in-law died and three days after that, one of Mbadaliga's closest friends also suddenly lost her life.

After taking a short leave of absence when his father passed away, Mbadaliga was unable to attend his brother-in-law and friend's funerals.

"I just couldn't fall behind anymore. Two weeks of work in final year is hectic. I had to come back. I had to catch up. I couldn't even attend lectures because emotionally I was not alright."

The week after his friend passed away Mbadaliga had to write four tests of which he only passed one. He received 38% and 39% respectively, something that had never happened to him before and he felt himself slipping into depression.

To make matters worse, Mbadaliga was struggling to pay his fees as his mother was the only source of income in the family. He could not afford to take a break because that would mean another year of fees he would need to pay back at the end of the day.

Despite the trauma he had faced, Mbadaliga started applying to several companies and took to social media and crowdfunding to raise funds to continue with his studies but was unsuccessful. He then went back to the company that had sponsored his initial years of study, which agreed to fund him for the remainder of his degree.

Mbadaliga concluded: "2017 will go down in my life journey as the year that hit me and almost broke me. I would have easily given up, but I had to exercise resilience and grit. But here I am, still standing and still pushing. I am currently pursuing my Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting, and this is my last year before starting my articles in my journey towards qualifying as a chartered accountant. I have an obligation to my late father, to make him proud."

By sharing his story, Mbadaliga hopes to inspire peers who might be fighting battles of their own. Such students are encouraged to seek support at the UCT Student Wellness Services, which has a multidisciplinary team of health professionals who provide mental health services on campus.

The UCT graduation ceremonies will take place between 3 and 10 April 2018.

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