



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemakingsdepartement

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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UCT student rises above dire poverty to graduate with academic excellence

When Ntebogang Segone graduates on the Dean's Merit List - in recognition of constant academic excellence - with a Bachelor of Science on 17 April he will dedicate his graduation to the woman who made his dream a reality.

His mother, Lettie Segone, has always been his number one supporter, and this degree is her return on investment.

Segone grew up in Vuyolethu Shelters in Kimberley with no electricity and just three communal taps shared between 45 shacks. His mother single-handedly raised seven children, her own two and her sibling's five, on her domestic worker's salary. When she lost her job, she joined a stokvel so that there was always food in the house. "One could say that I lived a very poor life, but for me I lived a good and happy life," he recalled.

At school Segone thrived, particularly in mathematics for which he received a distinction in matric. His results ensured him a place at UCT but he struggled to secure funding for tuition, accommodation and food. Segone approached the Northern Cape Premier's office seeking assistance. Because of a long working relationship with the Premier's office, which included co-founding a tutoring programme, he was able to secure R70 000. While this wasn't enough to cover all his expenses, he saw it as "a sign from God".

With the funding, his mother's blessing and the promise of temporary accommodation with his friend Prince Nwadeyi, Segone took the bus from Kimberley to Cape Town, the longest trip he had made on his own.

As orientation week approached and still without a place to call home, Segone considered off-campus accommodation. But the cheapest room he could find was R3 000 a month.

Although his mother offered to pay – it was R600 more than her monthly salary – Segone couldn't accept her generosity.

A few days before the start of term, he heard he'd got into Kilindini Residence. At registration, Segone discovered that he needed to choose a second major and electives and settled on physics as his second major.

Faced with courses he had felt rushed to choose, along with little understanding of how the university functioned and its support structures, Segone was academically excluded in his first year.

He knew he could do better, but his application for readmission was unsuccessful. After finding out the reasons and explaining his situation to the relevant academics Segone was reinstated on a probationary basis.

He changed his academic programme, swapping physics for a politics and governance major, stuck to a timetable and took full advantage of lectures, tutorials and other support structures.

Outside of academics, he served as co-chair of the [Institutional Forum](#) and successfully ran for the Students' Representative Council. During their tenure, the SRC helped raise over R2 million for students in financial difficulty.

He finished the probation period with an 80% average, attended two international leadership programmes, was elected president of the [Black Management Forum](#), and finished the academic year with a 70% average.

Segone has since started his honours in public administration and policy. And while he would like to study further, he plans to enter the workplace as soon as he graduates again in a year's time.

"I'm black at the end of the day. As a black individual, you need to understand that you are here at the university to get a better job, so you can provide for your family.

"I would love to study further but in reality, as a poor person, I just don't have the luxury." Should there be a way he can study further and send money home, Segone would certainly consider a longer life in academia.

But for now, he's trying to play catch-up with his family on graduation preparations. So far, six family members will join the celebrations in Cape Town. Among those attending are his mother and his sister. Their plans for the family's first university graduation began as early as January 2017.



Ntebogang Segone

Photo: Brenton Geach/UCT

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Aamirah Sunday

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5427
Cell: (076) 947 6071

Email: aamirah.sunday@uct.ac.za

Website: www.uct.ac.za