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## From personal struggle to pioneering research: UCT PhD graduate turns childhood challenges into a passion for health sciences



Polycarp Ndibangwi

Photo: Lerato Maduna

Witnessing the burden of suffering from heritable diseases like sickle cell disease, hereditary deafness, and congenital heart defects while growing up in his community attracted him to health sciences research, said University of Cape Town's (UCT) PhD graduate Polycarp Ndibangwi.

"I knew that I needed to contribute to healthcare research. I have been at UCT for five years, and I have enjoyed it a lot," he said.

Ndibangwi graduated with his PhD in [cardiomyopathy](#) on Tuesday, 3 September. The field focuses on how to use next-generation sequencing to ascertain the genetic characteristics of cardiomyopathy in a large South African cohort.

He said he had difficulties growing up and offers the advice: "Network while being kind and humble to everyone like a servant."

Ndibangwi shares some sad stories about his upbringing. "It happened during my adolescence: first, my father passed away in August 2003, and then my mother passed away in July the following year. As my mother's first-born son, I was deeply traumatised after her passing. Their deaths completely changed my life, as I had to learn to take care of myself," he said.

"My father was a pharmacist who wanted all his children to receive a good education. However, I remembered a verse from the Holy Bible: 'Honour your father and mother so that it may go well with you, and you may enjoy long life on the earth'. I began to meditate and reflect on all the plans our parents had for us, and I decided to do everything possible to continue my education."

He then worked in the construction industry and rice farming to make ends meet. However, things never worked out.

"In 2003, my main goal was to finish high school and attend university. I intended to work and save money for uniforms, transportation, fees and rent. Despite having a muscular physique, the physical demands of construction work were overwhelming. I often experienced swollen and painful elbows, making it difficult to raise my arms, and blisters on my palms, which made it hard to handle tools. Working in the hot sun also resulted in severe facial sunburns, causing significant pain during bathing," he said.

Not one who gives in easily, Ndibangwi ended up studying biochemistry and ultimately bioinformatics. He was, however, all the time interested in medicine, and later specialised in the inborn errors of metabolism or heart failure.

His PhD was funded by the African Cardiomyopathy and Myocarditis Registry Programme (IMHOTEP).

"I am motivated by a strong desire to make meaningful contributions. I actively seek opportunities to broaden my perspective through scientific research and intellectual discussions," he said.

Reflecting on his time at UCT, Ndibangwi said he enjoyed the experience. "The library and bus services are top-notch. The campus is always clean, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, students' mental health was prioritised," he remarked.

*Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News.*

***ENDS***

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