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From carer to advocate: UCT graduate champions disability inclusion



Deborah van der Berg

Photo: Lerato Maduna

When her father became a quadriplegic after an accident at age 30, Deborah van der Berg stepped into the role of a caregiver. This life-changing experience led her toward disability advocacy, inclusion and community empowerment. Now, as she graduates with a higher certificate in disability studies from the University of Cape Town (UCT), she is turning that lived experience into a lifelong mission to transform how society embraces diverse abilities.

For Van der Berg, the path to disability studies was deeply personal – shaped by 12 years of caring for her father. “It was on-the-job training,” she said. “I didn’t know anything about

disability at the time, but I had to learn – not only how to assist him, but how to see the person beyond the disability. That experience enriched me and allowed me to build a relationship with my father in a very unique way.”

According to her, people with disabilities should lead the way in shaping their own futures, and that communities become stronger and more inclusive when they embrace diverse abilities. “Disability should never define the limits of someone’s contribution. When we create spaces that are truly inclusive, we don’t only change individual lives – we transform societies,” she said.

Her perspective is rooted in lived experience. Caring for her father through quadriplegia taught her patience, dignity and perseverance – lessons she now applies to creating opportunities that empower others to thrive.

Van der Berg has transformed her resilience into community action, founding a disability group in Pelican Park that unites people living with a range of conditions – from cerebral palsy and the effects of strokes to visual impairment and polio.

The group hosts activities ranging from wheelchair races to long cane walks, with members participating in the Chaeli Dancing Club. “Too often people with disabilities are isolated,” she explained. “By connecting, they realise they’re not alone. They can share experiences, support one another, and feel included in community life.”

Van der Berg is committed to pushing for greater employment opportunities within government and ensuring that the constitutional rights of persons with disabilities are meaningfully implemented.

The Pelican Park initiative has grown beyond a simple social gathering, serving as a platform for awareness-raising, skills-sharing, and collective involvement. By uniting people with diverse disabilities, she has shown how solidarity can counteract isolation.

“Sometimes the biggest victory is simply helping someone feel seen,” she noted. “That moment when a person realises they are not invisible, that they are valued, heard and capable of more than they thought is what keeps me going.”

Van der Berg’s involvement has extended to the Chaeli Sports and Recreation Club, where she was invited to partner with a deaf-blind dancer. To prepare, she learnt South African Sign Language (SASL), a skill that now enriches her advocacy.

“The degree taught me to see through different lenses,” she said. “There are two disabilities: the one a person lives with, and the one society imposes by not being inclusive. My work is about encouraging people to look beyond both.”

Sport has become another avenue for change. As a UCT ParaSport volunteer, she has witnessed the power of inclusive sport codes such as goalball, blind soccer and wheelchair rugby.

“When you put on the blindfold and play, you understand that disability is only a part of who someone is,” she said.

Her volunteering extends to Muizenberg, where she supports the Roxy Surf Therapy programme. There, she assists wheelchair users by pushing specialised beach chairs to the water’s edge. “Watching how patiently and carefully the pro-surfers handle each participant inspired me,” she said. “I wanted to be part of that process.”

She said that balancing her studies with volunteer work is not a struggle. "Disability is in my DNA. It's what I live for."

She said service keeps her motivated: "I'm rendering a service to the most vulnerable in society – and witnessing that nothing is impossible."

Challenges remain, particularly around transport and accessibility. Yet she approaches setbacks with optimism and advocacy: "When things don't go as planned, I confront them kindly, then brush them off. The community always stands together."

She hopes to expand her work, grow awareness of invisible disabilities such as autism and bipolar disorder, and foster dialogue across society. "Communities should have inclusive dialogue with various stakeholders holistically. It's about ensuring participatory collaboration in decision-making for all members of society."

Story by Lyndon Julius, UCT News

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