

# RESILIENCE AMBASSADORS

Inspiring stories of resilience  
by UP students

**2022/23**



This publication is a collaboration between the University of Pretoria's Student Counselling Unit, Department of Student Affairs and Department of Institutional Advancement



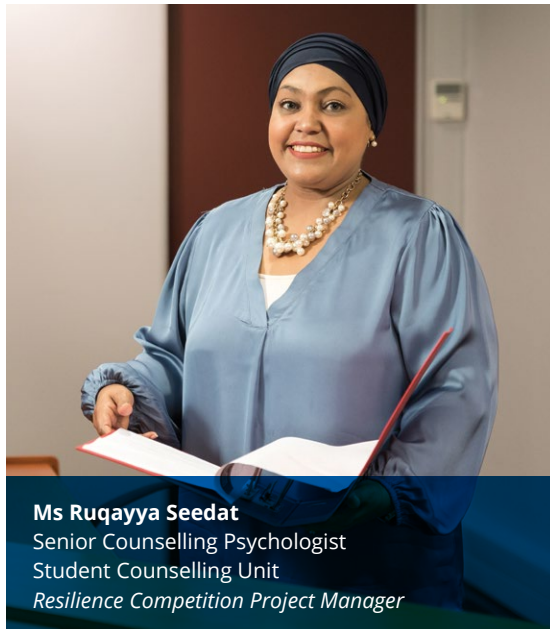
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# Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we share this special collection of resilience stories with you. These winning entries have been published with the written consent of the University of Pretoria (UP) students who penned their inspiring stories as part of the Student Counselling Unit's (SCU) 2022 Resilience Competition.



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The idea for this writing competition was conceived in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and materialised last year when the SCU launched its first Resilience Competition. This year, we were grateful to run the contest for a second time.

With this competition, the SCU hoped to encourage UP students to think about their challenges and adversities through the lens of resilience, celebrate them for their resilience, and inspire the UP community to reflect on and enhance their own levels of resilience.

It must be acknowledged that it was incredibly difficult to judge these entries as it is not possible to quantify human suffering. Each person's experience of adversity is unique, meaningful and valid. In choosing the winning entries, we asked the following questions to guide us in appreciating rather than judging the submissions:

- Did the writer provide a clear, coherent story of resilience that included risks, challenges and adversity?
- Did they mention any coping mechanisms, skills or strategies that they used to overcome adversity?
- Did they talk about the resources they drew on for support?
- Did their self-narrative convey their story effectively?
- Was the narrative moving, impactful or inspirational?
- Did they use basic language skills effectively (e.g. spelling and grammar)?

In publishing these entries, the SCU decided that the writers should remain anonymous. While these stories are ultimately uplifting accounts of overcoming adversity, they also contain deeply personal accounts of physical and mental struggles that may result in the writers experiencing possible discrimination or victimisation. It is our ethical duty to protect them from any possible unintended harm.

We hope these stories will invite you to pause and reflect on the kinds of adversity experienced by our students, the unimaginable resilience they have shown, the coping mechanisms they employed and the resources that were available to them for support. Perhaps these accounts may shed light on how the UP community could better support its students by providing opportunities to help them develop coping strategies, and by strengthening and expanding the resources or support services that are available.

Thank you to all the students who shared their personal stories. We are deeply moved, inspired and in awe of your strength in the face of significant adversity. We would also like to thank our colleagues at the Department of Institutional Advancement for their generous support of this project, especially Ms Anna Semanya. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

**Thank you for taking the time to read these inspiring stories of resilience!**





**TRIGGER WARNING:**

**These essays contain sensitive content that some readers may find traumatising, including discussion about suicide, self-injurious behaviour, depression and sexual abuse. Your discretion is advised.**



# Top entries



## MY PAST MADE ME WHO I AM TODAY

This is my story about how I overcame chronic pain and mental illness to be the person I have always wanted to be.

When I was 14 years old, after months of searching for the cause of my chronic pain, I was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis. My time at high school was filled with hospital visits, which meant I was never able to be a teenager; I was predominantly a patient. Unsurprisingly, this caused me to fall into a deep depression, and I was put on different antidepressant medication every month to try to find one that would help. I did not feel “normal”. In Grade 8, I was absent from school for 50 days.

Naturally, this affected my academic performance, which has always been my top priority. The psychologist I was seeing at the time taught me how to reframe my thinking so I could take my life back. Even though therapy is a long process, it is worth it, as you learn about how changing your mindset can help you to change your narrative. My psychologist always told me to do what I can. It seems like such simple advice, yet it is what kept me going. Each day I just did what I could.

At 17, I was diagnosed with common variable immune deficiency; this meant my immune system was unable to protect me. My own body was simultaneously over-actively attacking my joints and under-actively attacking pathogens. I had to start monthly infusions of immunoglobulins to prevent infection. While in Grade 11, I also had surgery on my right hand for carpal tunnel syndrome. This was especially challenging as I was about to sit for the exams that would enable me to apply to university. After completing my physics paper with the help of a scribe, I felt uncertain about how I was going to survive the rest of high school, let alone university.

My studies had always taken priority over my health, so I did not factor in my medical conditions while planning my future. I hoped to study medicine, as I wanted others to be treated by a doctor who understood their pain. I thought medicine was the only way for me to use my experiences to help people. I mentioned to a few of my doctors that I had hoped to study medicine, but their immediate response was that it was not an option for someone with an immune system like mine. I was devastated. I did not know what I was going to do with my life.

After many tears and conversations with my parents and other loved ones, I realised that even if I had chosen to study medicine, I would still have wanted to do research. I realised that my strengths don't necessarily involve working with people, but rather analysing data and writing papers. It was such a relief to realise that my ambitions were not yet out of reach. To this day, I am grateful to the people who guided me through that time and helped me to identify my passion.

During my final year at school, I faced the pressures and challenges that any matriculant deals with. My depression and anxiety started to worsen, and I could feel my mental health going downhill. Even though I was going through a difficult time, I was grateful to be experiencing the same type of pressure as my peers. For the first time, my mental health issues were similar to those of “normal” teenagers.

After finding the right combination of medication and a psychologist with whom I could relate, I was slowly on my way to becoming myself again. Unfortunately, my health began to deteriorate again after I picked up a skin infection that was resistant to multiple antibiotics. I had an infection for 10 months that no amount of medicine was able to get under control. This piqued my interest in the problem of drug-

“ Even though therapy is a long process, it is worth it, as you learn about how changing your mindset can help you to change your narrative. ”

resistant microbes that the world is facing. In fact, I partially credit *staphylococcus aureus* for guiding me towards the field of microbiology.

After I matriculated in 2019, I had a clear vision of my future: I was going to study microbiology at the University of Pretoria (UP), get my honours degree, then obtain my master's degree abroad. When my matric results arrived, I was overjoyed to have received eight distinctions, and I knew it was due to God's grace.

I was accepted at UP and placed in House Erica, the residence where my sister spent three years and met most of her close friends. It felt as if I could finally take back my life and control my narrative. I have always had to advocate for myself, so I was grateful to learn of the University's Disability Unit, a department that was on my side. For the first time in many years, my mental and physical health was stable. I was still seeing my psychologist regularly and felt like I had all the tools I needed to live my life to the fullest.

After moving into House Erica, I made many friends and fully immersed myself in the residence culture. I was also enjoying my studies. But then the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world, and I became anxious about the impact on my health and newfound quality of life. I was devastated to have to move out of residence and away from my friends.

During this period, my health deteriorated yet again. Both my temporomandibular joints, which connect your jawbone to your skull, disintegrated to the point that they had to be replaced. It would require a fairly new procedure that had been done only a few times. I was unable to open my mouth more than two centimetres and was desperate for the pain to go away, so I elected to have the surgery. It was

extremely painful, and it took five months for me to fully recover. Though, despite the pain I'd experienced, I would choose to have surgery 100 times over. I was unable to write a few exams at the end of the first semester of my first year; fortunately, my lecturers were kind and understanding.

At the end of my first year, I was granted access to the Golden Key Society and, in 2021, I was able to return to residence. Even though there were many restrictions, it felt like I was being given my life back. I was taking modules that I found interesting, and I knew I was on the right path to fulfilling my dreams.

When I graduate, I intend to complete my BSc (Hons) in Medical Immunology. The Department of Immunology has done groundbreaking research and I'm excited to learn from some of the best scientists in the country. I hope to contribute to research in the field of immunology to help others with the same health conditions as me.

I still have ambitions to pursue postgraduate education in Europe, but for now, I am grateful to UP for all the opportunities I have been granted. The University gave me the chance to enjoy a social life while completing my studies.

I am also grateful to my family and friends who helped me through the most difficult time of my life. The resilience I have today did not come easily. It is the result of eight years of chronic pain and years of therapy.

It was not easy to get to this point in my life, but when I look back, I know that my past made me who I am today. It made me strong, independent and courageous. It made me resilient – it made me *me*.



## THE ANATOMY OF RESILIENCE

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As a child, I always dreamt of working in the medical field to help others, and being accepted into the University of Pretoria's (UP) School of Health Systems and Public Health was one of my greatest dreams come true – but it did not come easily.

Everything in life that's worth having comes with great sacrifice. I learnt that when you truly want something, you must keep going, despite the obstacles you face.

I was admitted into the health sciences stream at UP with many odds stacked against me. I was fearful, as no one in our family had made it as far as I had to study towards a degree. But at the start of my first semester, I did not have the means to pay my tuition fees or for accommodation. I had mixed feelings about my admission: I was happy yet also sad, as I was not sure if I would be able to raise the funds needed for me to sustain my studies.

I decided to take on different part-time jobs to raise the admission fees. In addition to selling vegetables during the day, I was also a waitress at a restaurant. I was alone in my vision. My parents were supportive but didn't have the money to help me.

Eventually, one of my uncles gave me half the registration fees; I had saved the other half, but the journey was far from over. I needed a place to stay and needed to feed myself. I had no idea where the money to meet those expenses would

come from; nonetheless, I enrolled for my degree. I had also been applying for bursaries, and there had been no positive outcome as yet.

The only thing I had was the hunger to pursue my goals and a passion to fulfil my dreams of studying. Along the way, things got harder; there was the pressure to complete my tasks and perform well despite not having textbooks, and I often thought of quitting. But I asked myself a question: is there anything in life that comes easily without hard work? My answer was no – if you want something, you have to work for it.

I started by changing my view about the obstacles I faced, and adopted a positive attitude and optimistic mindset. I began to look for help, and was fortunate to get assistance from UP's Faculty of Health Sciences. Registered students could collect food parcels every week. The parcel also contained basic necessities like toiletries, which I was very grateful for. This programme is available to students who need financial help or who do not have bursaries. It helped to reduce my financial burden, so I could focus on my studies without having to worry about what I would eat.

I also received help from the University in a variety of other ways. The FLY@UP student support programme offers tips and advice on health, wellness and exams. I also received clothing donations from students during winter; I was fortunate to get a warm jacket and blazer that helped me during the cold months. In addition, I got a free pair of

reading glasses with the help of the FLY@UP programme in collaboration with Specsavers. I also applied for financial aid from UP. Students can register to be considered for discounts, bursaries and other forms of funding and financial aid benefits. Plus, the University allocated data bundles for online learning, which was another great help.

The assistance I received from UP eased the pressure of daily living so I could focus on my studies. I never imagined that I would receive so much help from the University; I wish all students could make use of the resources that are provided by UP, such as CV and time management workshops and the Ready for Work programme that prepares students for the workplace.

At the start of the first semester, I struggled with anatomy, so I sought assistance among my peers. Fortunately, I found a study partner who shared the same vision and positive attitude as I did. We began studying together and worked on modules that we were having difficulty with by making use of different learning methods. For example, we were both battling with anatomy, specifically with the muscles in the human body. So we started drawing them and using medical jargon in our casual conversations. Learning became enjoyable to the extent that I was able to randomly identify and name every muscle and its function.

Anatomy gradually became one of my favourite modules. I also made use of the library services to find medical texts such as *Gray's Anatomy*, which I found on a library database called Clinical Key. The medical library has informative books that feature labelled diagrams, which helped me to more easily identify parts of the human anatomy. I was allowed to borrow these books and use them to study at home. This helped greatly as I could not afford to buy textbooks.

Studying in advance helped me to manage my time for other modules. As a result, I passed all my core and elective modules. There is a huge difference between studying to pass and studying to understand – I learnt that studying to understand helps you to fully comprehend information rather than cramming and regurgitating information.

Life is an emotional roller-coaster, but you must find the strength to get through the trials and tribulations so that you don't become disillusioned and stray from the goals you have set for yourself. It might sound easier to say than do, but you should always be hopeful and resilient during troubled times as it builds character.

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## WHERE YOU COME FROM DOES NOT DEFINE WHERE YOU ARE GOING

Every mother's dream is to see their child pass matric, go to university and graduate. I grew up in a small rural area in Mpumalanga where there aren't adequate resources, nor are there educated or experienced people who can guide you on which steps to take in life.

In 2015, I fell pregnant, a year before entering matric. Even though I am not the first-born, my mother looked up to me because my sister had dropped out of high school. But when I fell pregnant, things became bad. My mom was so disappointed in me that she would not speak to me nor take care of me when I was sick.

In my final trimester, I had to leave school and stay home until I had given birth. After I'd had the baby, while I was recovering, the time had come for the mock exams and I had to go back to school. It was a difficult time because I had to study every night while taking care of my child. My sister helped me during the day, but I was alone from the time I got home from school until the next morning. I had to deal with the stress of exams and the fact that my own mother had isolated herself from me and the baby.

I recall one night when a girl from my neighbourhood came to the house and asked for help with physical sciences. My mom told her not to associate herself with me because I was a bad influence. I was so heartbroken that I cried in front of that girl.

Life went on, and I passed matric, though I did not do well in mathematics.

In January 2017, I asked my mom if I could apply for tertiary studies; I hadn't applied the previous year because I had

lost hope. Her response was: "You chose to be a mother, so you have to stay with your child. I worked for my two kids; I did not leave you and your sister with anyone." These were painful words. The only thing that would heal her heart was to see me make a success of myself.

I stayed home and lived off a grant, but soon realised that staying at home was not helping. I also wanted my baby to eat healthy food and wear nice clothes, and the grant was not enough. So I started looking for a job on the farms nearby. Fortunately, I was hired. It was not easy, but I wanted to show my mother that even though I had made a mistake, I was still a responsible person. I worked on the farm for two weeks and was paid R520. I went to town to buy nappies and baby formula and when I got back, my mother was standing at the door. She said: "Look at yourself – look how thin you are. You want your father's family to think I am abusing you?" I did not answer her; I just listened until she was done talking and went inside. I never went back to the farm.

I began submitting CVs to retail stores and finally got a job at Shoprite. The wage was good, and I was able to provide for my child. I'd also saved some money because I had planned to improve my maths grade – I had no access to the internet, and did not know that I could in fact further my studies with a level 2 in maths. People in rural areas always have something to say, and I was told that I would not be accepted at higher education institutions. Despite this, I saved towards registration fees, a uniform and stationery because I had planned to be a full-time learner the following year. In January 2018, I resigned from Shoprite and went to school.

But on the home front, things were becoming challenging. My stepfather would often visit our home drunk every Friday and beat my mom – that was his routine. Also, my elder sister,



who lived nearby with her boyfriend and three kids, was having difficulties. She and her boyfriend were unemployed and depended on a child's grant; but her boyfriend would use the money for alcohol and gambling. When my sister tried to reason with him, he'd beat her up in front of the kids; of course, they were scared of him. My mother had given up on my sister, so I had to step in. I tried to convince her to go back home; eventually, she moved out voluntarily.

Unfortunately, my sister became ill and went to stay with a traditional healer, so I had to take care of her kids every day before and after school because my mom went to work very early in the morning and came back late.

There was still the problem of my abusive stepfather. One Friday, he came to the house around midnight and pierced a hole in the water tank. I was awake as I was studying for a test the following day. I heard water spraying and woke my mother up. She was furious and chased him out. She'd had a protection order against him yet he often violated it. My mom came back home and told me that he had gone back to the house he was renting.

The next day at about 4pm, I saw a crowd of people around the yard; then I saw police vans coming. That's when I learnt that they were looking for my mother because she had allegedly committed murder. My mother had heard about the death of my stepfather at work because it was all over the news. She handed herself in at the nearest police station. And there I was, with a sister who was sick and having to take care of all these children, including mine.

I dropped out of school because the community was threatening to burn our house down if we didn't move out. None of our family members were willing to take us in, so we

moved to an informal settlement in Matsulu. This was not easy as we had no relatives and were a big family living in a small shack. Luckily, my mom was found innocent and things got better when we became a whole family again.

This was when I decided to apply to universities.

Unfortunately, I was not admitted, but a friend told me about an apprenticeship at the Khosithi Artisan and Skills Training Institute. With the little stipend I got there, I was able to extend the shack to make it a two-room dwelling. I still had hope that I would be admitted to a university.

Thankfully, the University of Pretoria (UP) and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme came through for me. But my first year in 2021 was not easy, as classes were online and I didn't have a laptop. I had to use a barely functioning phone, and navigating through ClickUP was a disaster. I decided to use my book allowance to buy a laptop instead of books. I passed my first semester very well but the situation at home was still bad. Every month, I sent home a portion of my meal allowance because my mom and sister weren't working and I had to get a job. I got a job at Ackermans and the situation got better because I was able to use that money to build another room.

Through hard work and persistence, I kept my grades up. With all that had happened, I learnt that where you come from does not define where you are going. I am the first in my family to matriculate and go to university. My resilience and hard work brought hope to my family. I have shown my mother that with a degree I can do more – that is why today, she looks at me with pride and with the knowledge that her daughter is resilient and can do whatever she sets her mind to.

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## THE END OF CANCER IS THE BEGINNING OF MY STORY

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A survivor is defined as a person who remains alive after an event in which others have died. Therefore, it is apt to call someone who has overcome cancer a “survivor”.

In July 2001, a baby was born to two delighted parents. The newborn had soft skin, chubby cheeks, a round head and big eyes – but one eye held a tumour.

Among the various types of childhood cancers, a retinoblastoma tumour is one of the most curable. This was of small comfort to my parents, who knew I would be affected with the lifelong impact of vision loss. Because this cancer has a good survival rate, my doctor said it wasn’t about saving lives, but about saving eyes. He was true to his word, and was able to save 10% of my vision in the affected eye.

The physical impact of vision loss from a retinoblastoma is so overwhelming that the mental health impact remains largely undocumented. It is a myth that young children don’t remember invasive procedures. As I grew older, my memory retained the feeling and my body held the physical sensations of these experiences.

Being a pre-teen is challenging, but being a pre-teen undergoing cancer treatment is even worse. While my friends got jewellery and make-up kits for their 13<sup>th</sup> birthdays, I received cross-eye correction surgery. My birthday was spent surrounded by family and friends that I could barely see, and for a long time, I was scared to come out of my bedroom because I was so self-conscious of the eye patch covering half my face.

As I got older, I began to overcome the self-consciousness that came with my squint. However, the increase in maturity brought with it an increase in understanding of cancer itself – and with that came fear. I’d heard the words “cancer survivor” so often, yet only then did the weight of what that meant finally sink in. The first time I was old enough to understand the severity of my condition, I began to question whether my status of “survivor” would last forever. The doctor’s reassurance wasn’t enough and tears fell down my cheeks on the way home.

Throughout the years, I underwent many operations and became accustomed to going under the knife. However, the one thing I’ve never got used to is general anaesthesia. The feeling of suffocation, although not an actual threat, was constantly at the back of my mind. While it’s been years since I last had surgery, my fear lingered subconsciously. When COVID-19 started spreading through South Africa and I had to put a face mask on for the first time, the fear of my nose and mouth being covered, as is done when you are put under anaesthetic, reared its head. However, with time, I got used to the mask.

Taking the time to get used to things made me more adaptable. I had become accustomed to the hospital environment. Job-shadowing different doctors and dentists in the wards and consulting rooms felt familiar. So when it was time to choose a degree, the health sciences field welcomed me like an old friend.

I chose to study dentistry at UP and it was not a choice that I made lightly. The course work is difficult but incredibly interesting. One of the modules that I am studying this year is Anatomical Pathology. It was a shock when during a



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lecture on eye pathology, I saw the word “retinoblastoma” on the PowerPoint slides. Throughout the lecture, I felt like a spotlight was on me, even though none of my classmates knew about the cancer I’d had as a child.

Telling people about my vision loss and tumour has never been easy. Pity is not something I desire. In my mind, there is nothing to pity me for, as the vision loss is something I have grown up with and am used to. Studying towards a degree in dental surgery means that good vision is a must, and although my vision does not set me back, it does set me apart. I don’t want to be treated differently because of it. However, an outsider’s perspective always helps to put things in context.

A few years ago, my granddad had a cataract and subsequent blurred vision due to clouding of the eye caused by ageing. He experienced vision loss in one eye, just like I have. My granddad was in shock at what I’d been living with my entire life. He struggled with many menial tasks that he could complete perfectly well previously. He asked me how I had managed to navigate through life so well. In some ways, it was a blessing that I was born with vision loss because that was my “normal”. I simply knew no better than half a world.

There have been many blessings in my life, the two most important being the fact that I survived cancer and have retained half my vision. Many people with cancer do not get these blessings. I know of family members, friends or even strangers who have passed away because of it or who are suffering with it. I have read articles and books about people or characters with a poor cancer prognosis.

When I realised that I’d beaten the odds, I experienced survivor’s guilt: guilt at having some sight while others have none; guilt about subjecting my parents to a sick child; guilt for taking attention away from my younger brother due to my illness; guilt about my survival. What did I do differently that allowed me to survive instead of others? Why me and not them?

At times like this, my faith in God has played a role in my physical and mental recovery. In my religion, it is believed that God tests the people He loves most. Sometimes the path He sets us on involves experiencing illness and hardship in order to teach us things we would not be able to learn through comfort and prosperity.

Through the doctor’s hands, God saved me. However, my doctor was brilliant of his own accord. Dr Blignaut, a medical doctor from Cape Town who specialised in eye cancer and surgery, saved my eye. Sadly, he passed away when I was 12 years old and, although most of my interactions with him occurred when I was quite young, I took his death badly. The impact of his work on my life and that of countless other patients will never be forgotten. This is the type of doctor I hope to be one day; his reassuring smile is one that I always try to replicate when I talk to patients at the dental hospital.

Dr Blignaut always talked about making light of situations to deal with them more easily. He said joking is the best form of therapy when things go wrong, when an eye patch falls off, when a doctor asks me to cover my seeing eye and read a chart, when I’m scared of a check-up result or am struggling with equipment that isn’t designed with my vision loss in mind.

My other forms of therapy include writing. Between the age of 12 and 16, I kept a journal that helped me to keep my thoughts organised and comprehensible. While writing this reflective essay, I stumbled upon many feelings that had been repressed, and by writing, I was able to work through them.

With the help of my writing, a loving support system, God and many role models, I’ve reached a point where I can put the tumour and treatment behind me and live a life that doesn’t revolve around cancer.

The end of my cancer is just the beginning of the story for me, and I look forward to living the rest of my life and seeing the pages fill up.



## BACK FROM THE BRINK

In 2021, I left home to pursue my studies at the University of Pretoria (UP), and went to a different province in pursuit of greener pastures. I was fearful of the shift but also eager for a new experience, which is why I made the decision to go to a big city for the first time in my life, to a place where I didn't know anyone.

Things were challenging from the beginning. Being from Ngolo, a small village in the Eastern Cape, I struggled to adapt to the big city. It was a totally new environment with new people, different cultures and a language barrier. The biggest challenge was adapting to university life. I got bad grades, which was hard to deal with as I had been an A student all my life. I quickly became demotivated and even considered giving up on my dream of becoming a clinical associate.

My poor academic performance worried me and instead of trying to do better, I started skipping classes. I spent most days sleeping, eating and locked in my room. My mood was low and I did not enjoy reading novels, listening to music and attending poetry sessions any longer. Those had always been my favourite things to do.

I'd also think of different ways to end my life. One day, I tried to overdose on pills and had planned to lie there until the last breath left my body. Fortunately, my roommate saw what I was trying to do and stopped me. Following that eventful moment, she told me about the Student Counselling Unit at the University and encouraged me to seek help. I thought about it for about a week. Seeking help meant that I had to put in the work to help myself, and I wasn't sure that I was willing to do that yet. I had made my depression my comfort zone because it was the only thing that felt familiar.

Eventually, I made the decision to email the SCU. I made contact with a brilliant psychologist, Mr Sikander Kalla, who was always happy to help me. He gave me a sense of validation, security and safety, and the opportunity to voice my concerns. It wasn't easy

to open up to him at first, but he was so patient with me that I eventually did.

Mr Kalla then referred me to a psychiatrist, Dr Lerato Dikobe, who also welcomed me with open arms. She confirmed that I had depression and anxiety, and put me on treatment. But there was another problem: I couldn't afford the prescription medication. Thankfully, Dr Dikobe wrote a letter to the closest clinic so I could obtain the prescription. At the clinic, I met Dr Murray Louw, who was also happy to assist. I continued to have telephone counselling sessions with Mr Kalla during this time, and they were beneficial. I never paid anything for any of these sessions. Dr Louw worked at the clinic once a week and helped me to get the medication; he also did random check-ups to see how I was responding to the treatment. He still does.

I started feeling hopeful again and could see a little beam of light at the end of the tunnel. I got up, dusted myself off and kept going. It felt like a miracle because I never thought I would get out of that tunnel. I started reading novels again as a coping strategy, and would go for quick strolls to enjoy the sunshine and fresh air. My interest in my studies started coming back. All of these strategies were helpful, and I still use them as coping methods. Although it was a dark time in my life, I emerged a better person, a more improved version of myself. The statement that diamonds are created under extreme pressure is accurate. I emerged as a diamond. I still have a promising future ahead of me, and I can't wait to get there.

I am retaking the module I failed in my first year, and am doing well in class this time around. I am not moving too quickly; I am in my own lane and taking my time. I don't feel pressured by other people's advancement. While I wait patiently for my time, I simply smile and applaud them. In terms of my mental health, I wouldn't say that I am precisely where I would like to be, but I am definitely getting there. My faith has been rekindled and I am thrilled that I still have a promising future ahead of me.

With this account, I aim to encourage others never to give up on themselves.

“ I wouldn't say that I am precisely where I would like to be, but I am definitely getting there. ”





## DELAYED BUT NOT DENIED

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I am a second-year mechanical engineering student at the University of Pretoria (UP). Though, my proof of registration states that I have been enrolled at the University for three years. Now that's where things get interesting...

In 2018, I was a smart Grade 11 high school girl. I was getting very good grades, while doing countless extracurricular activities. Everything was going well and my hard work was paying off. In early 2019, I applied to three universities: Stellenbosch University, UP and the University of Cape Town. I only applied for two courses: medicine and engineering. I believed in myself so much that I had limited myself to three universities and applied for courses that required high scores. That did not matter to me, because I had always been an A student.

But guess what? Life decided to give me lemons when I least expected it. I learnt the hard way that it is wise to plan for the worst and the unknown.

It was in January 2020 when life threw a curveball my way. The 2019 matric results had been released and, being the optimist that I am, I woke up believing that I had obtained good grades in all my subjects. But all hope was lost when I saw my maths mark on my National Senior Certificate. While I had passed the subject, I did not do well enough to get into engineering or medicine. What hurt the most was the fact that the rest of my great grades were not going to save me in any way.

For three consecutive days, I slept on cold, wet pillows. I did not eat. I avoided my family every chance I got. I was miserable! I knew how strict the universities I had applied to were and knew my fate. But did I really?

To make myself feel in charge of the situation, I told my family that I would take a gap year, as I had invested too much in the past 12 years, only to be disappointed by a single subject at the very end of my high school career. I felt betrayed by myself, by the world and by my God, whom I silently questioned. Why had He allowed 2018 to be one of my worst years, knowing it was the year that would determine my future? I had given up, but my parents and loved ones kept encouraging me, so much so that I decided to ask for advice on how to deal with my circumstances. Telling people about my situation was embarrassing, because no one had expected me to experience admission issues as a result of a bad grade.

That period in my life taught me humility. I reached out to a friend who was at UP, and he told me that a friend of his had encountered the same situation and that it was "all going to work out". I was angry at him for saying that. How – if nothing had worked out after I had put so much effort into my schoolwork?

I was advised to apply for the BSc Physics extended programme if I wanted to go into engineering or for the Biological and Agricultural Sciences extended programme if I wanted to go into medicine. Upgrading my marks was never an option: either I found something I was good at and never

returned to school, or I was accepted by UP and pursued my dreams.

According to the UP portal, I had not been accepted for any courses at all, yet funnily enough, I had been placed at TuksRes (House Erica). That motivated me to stop sulking and at least try to do something.

There I was, under the scorching sun, in the long registration queue on Hillcrest Campus. As the hours ticked by, the sun would appear and disappear in the presence of clouds. Thirst and hunger attacked me. "I am literally doing a walk-in right now," I thought to myself. "I am doing a walk-in with good grades, except for that one maths mark, which messed everything up for me." My worst fear was failing to be placed after being encouraged by students who had received placement. After two days of queuing, I was one of the lucky students who got the opportunity to do the BSc Physics extended course on Mamelodi Campus.

I was excited, but that feeling did not last long. Upon arriving on Mamelodi Campus, I realised how few students were doing the course and I felt as if I was not really at university. I remember crying and asking myself why I had to start on Mamelodi Campus before being able to go to Hatfield Campus to pursue my career, especially after all the hard work I had put in from an early age.

That's when I learnt the true meaning of gratitude. I had so much to be grateful for, but was blinded by comparing my

situation at UP to that of others at the University. I had been accepted by the best university in Africa and was studying something in line with my dream career, so I had every reason to be grateful. On the other hand, travelling early in the morning and late in the afternoon by bus to and from Mamelodi Campus was not easy, and the COVID-19 lockdown did not make it any easier. But it all paid off in the end.

I am now in the second year of my Mechanical Engineering degree, and I must say, if I had not started at Mamelodi Campus, the course would have been much harder. Everything I learnt there has helped me, and I would not ask for things to have played out any differently. I have mastered the Harvard referencing system; I can operate Microsoft Office well; I understand chemistry and physics better than before; and I am well equipped for most of my courses.

My wish is to reach out to those at Mamelodi Campus and tell them that they are part of the special few who have the advantage of being equipped with knowledge that can simplify the courses they would like to pursue. To think that I did not take pride in doing an extended programme makes me feel ashamed because I hadn't realised just how privileged I was.

Humility, gratitude and resilience are three of the greatest things UP has taught me in the three years that I have been enrolled there. My God? His plan is to help me prosper.

“ To think that I did not take pride in doing an extended programme makes me feel ashamed because I hadn't realised just how privileged I was. ”





# New Chapter

## I'M STILL HERE

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During my five years of studying medicine at the University of Pretoria (UP), I've faced numerous challenges.

I've seen my father physically abuse my mom, who not only battled with extreme loneliness and depression, but also struggled with her health, and was afraid of having her leg amputated.

In those five years, I lost a younger cousin who drowned while canoeing and learned of a family member who was sexually molested by a senior at work. I watched my friends mourn the death of their parents, and lost a friend as a result of depression we thought he'd overcome.

Then there were the travails of my brother, who fell into a coma after getting meningitis. He was also diagnosed with type 2 bipolar disorder and needed to take time off school due to the recurrent manic episodes he was having. At one point, he was worried about where he'd stay as our family didn't have the funds to pay for his accommodation. Music was the one thing keeping him together, but then he suffered some hearing loss. Eventually, he attempted suicide.

I've witnessed many tragedies and seen so much pain, including losing two patients I had formed a close bond with. Yet for some reason, I'm still here. In spite of everything I've seen, everything I've been through, I'm still here. I didn't know how resilient I was until I was asked to tell my story.

Above lies the misfortunes I've seen and walked through with my friends and family, but below lies my own story of resilience, of how and what I've overcome and my reasons for holding on when letting go felt so natural.

In my second year at UP, I was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy, a heart condition that causes a reduction in the amount of blood that can be sent to the rest of my body. It was not the first time I'd received bad news about my health, but it was the first time I was alone, and it was the first time I knew what the diagnosis meant as soon as I'd heard it.

This diagnosis was coupled with an existing condition I had called sickle cell anaemia. From the age of 14, I'd had to sit out various sporting and strenuous activities because of this blood condition, which causes my blood to clot and deprives some organs of oxygen when under extreme stress. Watching others my age able to do things I wasn't able to do caused me to develop an inferiority complex that grew stronger each year as the gap between my peers and I became obvious to myself and those around me.

"I'm a weakling and I don't deserve to be alive. I would be dead if mom and dad didn't buy medication for me. I don't deserve to be alive." This became my narrative throughout high school, and was made worse every time I fell ill and had to be taken care of. Once I had what is called a "sickle crisis", which left me blind for a day and a half and immobile for three days; I had to be bathed and groomed by my family.

Being diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy gave life to the seed that my 14-year-old self had planted, and so began the spiral into my first bout of depression.

With the pressures of medical school piling on, my mind replaying the "I am not good enough to be alive" narrative, my family situation deteriorating, and the joint pain and tiredness that come with sickle cell anaemia, I started missing more and more days of school. I fell further and further behind in my studies. I stayed in my room all day, not eating and losing

“Knowing that I’m loved and cherished, that I’m an essential part of a team, that my absence would create a hole.”

weight, smelling worse each day I didn’t shower. My mental health kept declining as the reasons to end my life kept getting bigger and more valid. I dropped out of cultural event Step It UP and every other activity that had kept me going. I started seeing my friends less, stopped seeing the campus psychologist and started self-harming.

It was the darkest time of my life, yet I made it through – not on my own, but with the help of friends who would knock for 30 minutes at a time on my locked door or open the blinds to rouse me. I had a support structure that held me up when I desperately wanted to fall. I’m truly grateful to have had these people in my life.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck, forcing me to stay home and unable to escape the reality of my domestic situation. I don’t need to go into detail about the ordeal; all families have their issues. It was nice having my brother around, though. I spent most of 2020 becoming financially literate, getting to know God personally and journaling my ideas about the future.

In 2021, I was admitted to hospital twice. The first time was because my oxygen saturation levels were below 90%, and it was discovered that I had blood clots in my lungs as a result of the sickle cell anaemia. I was grateful for having been diagnosed in time and was in good spirits, despite having to spend my birthday in hospital.

Not being able to see my family because of COVID-19 hospital regulations made me homesick, and seeing no improvement to my lung functioning despite having been on oxygen therapy for a week made me feel sorry for myself. But as usual, I was not alone. My hospital stay was made better by the nurses who sang ‘Happy Birthday’ to me, and by being able to share my cake with the other patients in the ward, who I also later examined and explained each of their conditions to while I there.

Later in the year, I was admitted again, and was told that I would be put on lifelong anticoagulants (blood thinners). This meant no contact sport due to the risk of intracranial bleeding (bleeding in the brain) – no soccer, no basketball, no boxing...

Once again, the activities in which I competed against my peers were being taken away from me, and once again, the inferiority complex reared its head, this time, much stronger.

“You should just die; jump off the ninth floor; drink all your blood thinners and slit your wrist; steal a loaf of bread from Pick n Pay and get into a fight in prison.” My thoughts were all over the place.

My health had also started to decline; I experienced frequent dizzy spells, shortness of breath and had to crouch when showering as I could not stand for five minutes at a time. On many occasions, walking up a hill at night took everything out of me. I would break down and cry on the pavement, wishing I had the courage to give up and roll into the road.

But in every situation, I’ve been helped and been given hope. On those nights, I called my best friend to help me the rest of the way to my room. Fellow students were uncharacteristically friendly on days I wanted to drop out of med school and my dad gave me some much-needed words of encouragement.

I’ve only got this far because of the people around me. Knowing that I’m loved and cherished, that I’m an essential part of a team, that my absence would create a hole that would make everyone around me have to work harder to fill are the truths that get me up every morning despite the pain, shortness of breath, dizziness and occasional bleeding.

Many people don’t know that there is anything wrong with me, and I don’t want them to. I’ve been shouted at by a senior doctor for sitting down during ward rounds, been asked to stand so someone else can sit down and asked to carry things that leave me breathless for almost an hour afterwards. Still, I’ve become a valuable member of the team, and the negative self-talk has slowly become less frequent.

Listening to podcasts about self-compassion, mental health and unhelpful thinking patterns helped a lot. God also became a source of strength, especially when I lost 70% of my life savings in stocks.

One of my greatest achievements has to be when I performed well at school despite having suffered severe bleeding, abnormally low blood pressure and a high oxygen saturation reading. Still I managed to hit the gym and achieved a personal best on the bench press. I was also able to be there for those around me: my mom, brother and a church friend who was in need of advice. I’ve overcome many struggles, but I couldn’t have done it alone – and I’m glad I didn’t have to.



## GIVE ME A PEN AND I WILL FIND MY WAY

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*"Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated" – Robert Collier*

I'm certain you are wondering, "Who is this person who is beginning their story with success in it already?" It could be because I have always won in whatever I did.

Yes, indeed – "Conquer" is my fourth middle name from my paternal side, passed on to me from my great-great-uncle's mother who happens to be (supposedly) my grandmother's great-grandmother on my maternal side (wink wink!). If trying to comprehend this bogus story did not help to loosen you up after reading 100 other stories, then read it again!

Oh, and that, by the way, is how I charmed my way through tough academic situations: humour. Worked every time. I am a first-year nursing student. Listen to that, first-year nursing student. I have to say it feels good to finally acknowledge that: this is my discipline and I am proud of it. Although this was not always the case. Before this, however, academic affairs were a breeze!

Pay attention, this is going to go fast: served for 10 years on the Representative Council of Learners committee and was president twice; former chairperson of the Dr KK District Circuit committee; hall-of-famer at five schools for public speaking; debating champion; top achiever KSS 2021 with a handful of distinctions and an 83% average – the typical story of any smarty pants.

But my accolades could do only so much: carry me into university. After that? Life gave me a proper smack across the face and many more punches to the gut.

*"A man's pride can be his downfall, and he needs to learn when to turn to others for support and guidance" – Bear Grylls*

It is every poor kid's dream to escape the slums of poverty and experience varsity life. That is all I have ever prayed for. Being the first in my family to make it into university meant the pressure to succeed became intense. Failure was not an option.

All I knew was how to win, which is not a dreadful thing. But like a poisonous tree that I had planted, I kept eating fruit from the same tree instead of stepping back to re-evaluate like a good farmer. I had trouble transitioning from high school and life with Grandma to an entirely different environment without her. I experienced panic attacks while sleeping in a cold bed every night, 500km away from home. Oh my. Paranoia. My imagination is too active for someone my age, but I swear, the voices in my head became loud. Louder. I lost touch with reality a bit; with no friends and family, my depression resurfaced.

I never knew my parents, which is why mental illness manifested over the years. Grandma knew how to help me escape, though. She numbed all the pain. Loneliness became isolation, with her being so far out of reach. For weeks, I would starve myself and deprive myself of hygiene because these voices bound me to bed. I developed pressure sores and became disorientated from dehydration – but for some reason, I hung on. "I hope I'll make it out of here someday, even if it takes me all night or 100 years," was all I heard inside my head.

*"Academic stress-related pre-birth suicides" – Alan Moore*



Academically, I was suffocating. Imagine academic stress meeting sick old me with my mental status. From doing seven subjects in school and covering one topic over two weeks to doing 19 modules in a year and covering one topic a day. If stress burned calories, I would be a supermodel.

The first quarter was a nightmare. I failed most of my modules. Deregistering swept to the top of my priority list. The second quarter wasn't any better. I barely made it with my weak immune system and fell sick every month, so getting out of bed to attend class became a milestone. I experienced this every single day for months. Rough does not explain it. School was not about learning any longer; it was about how much stress you can manage before you have a mental breakdown. "I'm going insane, but that's okay, because my grades are more important than my mental health anyway," I would say to myself (note: I was not being sarcastic).

I could not go home during the first recess because I was never in a good place financially. Coming from where I come from, sending money home is a necessity. At that point, I did not know whether I was coming or going. I never understood why there were so many students committing suicide every year. Well, now I do. I had no support system; Grandma is illiterate and couldn't dial my number to call me; distant relatives had their own lives; old friends had their own problems; and no one was asking after me – "are you still breathing; have you eaten?" It was so hard. If you knew the number of times I peeped over my balcony, you'd be surprised by the fact that I am still alive. "I don't want to die anymore!" I'd scream to shut the voices up. "No, I don't want to die." I did not.

*"Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes... including you" – Anne Lamott*

You know the saying, "When you can't beat the system, join it"? Well, that saying is not applicable anywhere. Throw it away. I know better now. Before my assigned mentor could get hold of me, I had to have a conversation with myself.

As clichéd as this may sound, journalling is the way to go. Putting your emotions down on paper gives you a better understanding of what is going on in your head. Doing this awakened my heart, passion and ambition.

I realised I was living an answered prayer, a dream come true. Did I want to throw all that away?

I began to see the many blessings I had: a roof over my head, clothes on my back, food in my stomach, clean running water and shoes on my feet – what more could I need? What makes me even more fortunate is the fact that the University of Pretoria offers free counselling. The decision to call that number must have been the best decision I have ever made. That lady gave me the platform to cry, complain, scream and yell. She was so supportive and patient. She did not judge me; instead, she referred me to a psychologist. Although the process is a long one, it was worth it in the end. She also referred me to a student advisor to help me create a study timetable, and my life has never been easier. I realised I was not alone when my mentor assured me that she too went through the same thing in her first year. I started to feel alive again.

*"Sometimes it is the smallest decisions that can change your life forever" – Keri Russell*

In the end, you should ask yourself: "Did I work so hard all those years to give up now?" No. We all want to say at some point, "I made it." It should not always be about school. Introduce variety into your life: go out with friends, read an interesting book, laugh, mess up! Heck, join the gym! You are the most permanent thing, so take care of yourself. It is not simple, but it is doable. Just as author Adam Osborne said: "The most valuable thing you can make is a mistake – you can't learn anything from being perfect."

Getting up again is what matters. That is what defines who you are.

“What makes me even more fortunate is the fact that the University of Pretoria offers free counselling.”

# Conclusion

A story is a wonderful thing. Psychologically speaking, story telling is a profound and powerful tool.



**Dr Hanlé Kirkcaldy**  
Head: Student Counselling Unit

Whether they are historical in nature, fables, myths or real-life events – such as those related in this booklet – stories have supported humans for millennia. They aid reflection, create distance from pain, investigate options, generate solutions and build wisdom. We follow and cheer the hero, from the valley of despair to the mountain of victory. When the hero eventually experiences success, we see our own potential unfolding and the possibility of a resilient-self emerging. By listening to and learning from a story, we help ourselves. However, these stories may also help us to determine where support is needed for those walking beside us every day.

Thank you for engaging with these wonderful stories of resilience, grit and hope. We published them with the permission of the students because we were encouraged by their narratives, inspired by their journeys and exhilarated by the fact that such adversity could be overcome. We also thought our students were very talented storytellers and writers, and deserved to be published!

We would like to thank the Department of Institutional Advancement (DIA) for its support of this project. The DIA shares our philosophy and desire to break down the silos around mental health support by collaborating with other departments. Mental health and well-being is everybody's business.

Our hope is that these stories will contribute to the life journeys of staff and students at the University. One never knows the backstory of a student or colleague. As psychologists and counsellors at the SCU, we often feel privileged to hear such stories, and are humbled by the people we meet.

We hope you have had the same experience as you read these accounts.

**The University wishes to build resilient graduates, a caring campus and a community of support. It is our hope that you feel more connected through these stories and are left feeling inspired.**





Email the Student Counselling Unit for any service request:

**24 hour telephonic support:**  
UP Careline: 0800 747 747

