

MEDIA RELEASE

UP History student overcomes disability challenges to graduate cum laude

PRETORIA – University of Pretoria (UP) student Rudolph Boraine has graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Social Science (Hons) degree in History, having completed a research report on the contested history of the koeksister, the well-loved South African confectionary.

Boraine (25) – who lives with cerebral palsy, which affects the physical functioning of his entire body – graduated cum laude from UP for the second time. In addition to his latest achievement, he was also part of the team that was awarded first prize in the History Honours Archive Research Project, which formed part of the course’s core modules. He also received the award for the best second-year History student in 2019.

“It is an honour for me to graduate from this remarkable institution for the second time,” said Boraine, who is currently furthering his studies in Psychology. “My journey to graduation at honours level was challenging in the sense that I live with a disability. I needed to make a lot of adjustments, such as extending the time that I had at my disposal to write my research report as well as taking extra time to complete some assignments, as my typing accuracy and speed of communication are affected by my disability.”

Boraine’s Honours research report – titled ‘The koeksister: A twisted history?’ – interrogated the sweet treat’s “twisted historical origin” and compared the koeksister (with a “k”) of Dutch/Afrikaans origin to the koesister (without a “k”) of Cape Malay origin. Using a comparative methodology, he researched the origins of both versions of the koeksister using secondary sources, as well as recipe books as a form of primary research or alternate archive. His comparison considered both the similarities and differences in nomenclature, geographic origins, ingredients, preparation processes, physical shapes, serving traditions as well as the community context of the two food items.

While the ingredients for both are fairly similar, the shape of the two items are remarkably different: the koeksister is plaited, while the koesister is oblong. Furthermore, the Afrikaans version is regarded primarily as a *klein koekie* (small cake) and is served as a confectionary item, while the Cape Malay version has multiple serving options, including as a sweet treat, breakfast item and during religious festivals.

“[This confectionary] has a more contested, contentious and intertwined cultural history than commonly assumed by historians and the broader public,” Boraine said.

His supervisor, Professor Karen L Harris, said she was impressed by the amount of research that Boraine had undertaken in order to develop an appropriate hypothesis and present a well-balanced discussion. “He made excellent use of a range of sources and did extensive research using both academic and alternate sources to substantiate this contested history.”

The external examiner agreed, describing Boraine’s arguments as “convincing”. “The amount of work that the student has put into this research report is certainly commendable. A great strength was the range of sources consulted in assembling this work, which demonstrated an openness to combining the findings of significant mainstream historical scholarship with more popular and less conventional material.”

Boraine remarked that he was given valuable support throughout his studies, from a facilitator who helped him to get around campus as well as from UP's Department of Historical and Heritage Studies, through which he completed his honours degree. "The staff were always accommodating, kind, compassionate and understanding," he said. "I realised that anything can be achieved with hard work, despite any physical challenges that you may have – if you remain an optimistic student with a clear set of goals, you can achieve anything."

He also has a word of encouragement for students with disabilities. "Research possibilities at UP do not have to be hampered by physical challenges. My advice to students living with a disability who wish to achieve academic success is to work hard and to stay committed to their goals. Remember, with the right support and mindset, everything is possible."

Captions:

Prof Karen Harris, Rudolph Boraine and his father, Prof André Boraine, former UP Dean of Law

Rudolph Boraine

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 114-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only University in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked top in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. The QS World University Rankings also placed UP among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and UP is in the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences), according to the Web of Science Essential Indicators.

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33,000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training.

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