

## NEWS RELEASE

### Beating the odds: UP graduate on balancing life with Miller syndrome



*Group of students at one of the UP-computer labs*

PRETORIA - "I am definitely a go-getter," says Hanri Kriel, who recently graduated with a PhD in Drama and Film during the University of Pretoria's (UP) spring graduation ceremony. "I am determined and passionate, and I don't let anything or anyone stand in the way of me achieving my dreams."

Kriel was born with Miller syndrome, a rare genetic disorder caused by a gene mutation that is characterised by facial and limb abnormalities, mostly accompanied by hearing loss, which could delay speech development. The condition's impact on facial development includes underdeveloped cheekbones, a small lower jaw and a shortened soft palate and/or cleft palate.

Although the hearing loss presented challenges, such as Kriel needing to adapt to certain learning environments, she has always been determined to obtain a PhD. She says that transitioning from writing her master's thesis in Afrikaans to completing her doctorate in English was yet another significant hurdle that she's proud to have overcome.

"This challenge also pushed me to become more resilient and innovative in finding ways to ensure that I could fully engage with my studies," Kriel explains. "However, during the data collection phase of my study,

recruiting participants with hearing loss was challenging because some felt that their participation wouldn't make a difference, and those who are deaf or hard of hearing often see themselves as a separate community.

"Another big challenge was navigating the initial two years of my research journey during the COVID-19 pandemic, when everything had to be done online. This, in turn, made everything a bit difficult as others couldn't necessarily understand what I was saying due to my hearing loss and speech."

Kriel says seeing deaf participant Mia le Roux win the Miss South Africa title was incredibly inspiring and a powerful statement that highlighted the importance of inclusion.

"It demonstrates that the barriers are slowly being broken down and that people of all abilities are being recognised for their talents and contributions," Kriel says. "Even though we might speak differently due to our hearing loss, our minds are just as capable, and we deserve to be included."

## **Her PhD journey**

She says finding out that she had passed her PhD was a moment of immense joy and relief.

"It felt like reaching the summit of Mount Everest after a long, challenging climb. The first people I informed about this wonderful news were my parents who have always been my biggest supporters and inspiration."

Kriel's PhD thesis focused on improving current captioning models to develop inclusive captioning practices for television that better serve Afrikaans viewers with hearing loss in South Africa, with the potential to implement these practices in all shows and languages across the country. She says the topic was motivated by her own experiences.

"The proposed standards and methodologies consider diverse needs and aim to improve overall accessibility in the South African television industry," Kriel explains. "People tend to think that plain subtitles are for the hearing loss community, but actually it's for those whose language is different than what is spoken on screen. Even though subtitles and captions have the same purpose of providing the spoken word of what is being said on screen, South Africans with hearing loss tend to miss out on a lot."

With this thesis, Kriel hopes to influence policy and industry practices regarding subtitling and captioning, thereby promoting a more inclusive media landscape that serves all viewers equally.

"My goal is to ensure that everyone, regardless of their language or ability, can access television content in their preferred language with accurate and available captions."

The 33-year-old plans to continue advocating for inclusivity in the media and addressing accessibility issues.

"I hope to expand my career in the film and television industry, potentially working with one of the popular streaming services to drive change and inspire others. I aim to take on projects that challenge me and make a difference in the industry."

She describes her time at UP as transformative, and having been filled with both challenges and triumphs.

"Some of my fondest memories include collaborating with fellow researchers, engaging in discussions with my mentors and supervisors, and seeing my research make an impact in a real-world setting."

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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 its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers 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 the best 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. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)