

## NEWS RELEASE

### Newlyweds share their UP PhD graduate journey



*Jean-Pierre and René Stander both received PhDs in Mathematical Statistics during UP's 2024 Spring Graduation.*

PRETORIA - Building a life together as newlyweds is already a challenge for most. Add to that studying for a doctorate, and it takes 'couple goals' to a new level. But for Jean-Pierre Stander (28) and René Stander (27), who both graduated with PhDs in Mathematical Statistics at the University of Pretoria's (UP's) 2024 Spring Graduation ceremonies in the first week of September, it only made them stronger.

Navigating the challenges of building a life together and managing academic responsibilities required sacrifices, but mutual support and understanding strengthened their relationship, turning potential obstacles into opportunities for growth. "As a newly wedded couple, we had to adjust to living together as well as building a life together and working. We knew we had to make sacrifices to be able to spend time on our academic responsibilities. By having the same goal in mind, it was easier to make these sacrifices," Jean-Pierre says.

The pair first crossed paths while studying actuarial science as undergraduates. "We met in class in the second year of our undergraduate degree, so we got to know each other while studying the same degrees with the same subjects," René adds.

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Their academic journey continued into their master's degrees, which laid the foundation for their PhD pursuits. René, with aspirations of an academic career, saw the doctorate as an essential step. For both, continuing their studies was a logical progression, driven by a passion for their field and a desire to avoid the complexities of returning to university later in life.

The PhD journey is known for its emotional highs and lows, and Jean-Pierre and René experienced this first hand. Fortunately, their mutual support made a significant difference. "When one of us was struggling, the other one was ready to support. Having experienced your own down helped in knowing how to motivate one another. Studying in the same field allowed for opportunities to talk through ideas and being each other's 'sound board' about ideas," Jean- Pierre explains.

The couple also relied on their support network of family and friends, and made sure to take breaks together to debrief and recharge. This approach helped them maintain their well-being and focus on their research.

Despite their distinct research focuses, they supported each other's work and remained actively engaged in their individual projects.

UP played a crucial role in their academic journey. Under the guidance of their supervisor, Professor Inger Fabris-Rotelli, they received valuable support and motivation. "She kept us motivated to keep going and to help us graduate at the same time. Through the University of Pretoria, we had the invaluable opportunity to attend local and international conferences, which exposed us to experts in our research field, and [allowed us to] have a platform to present our research and obtain feedback and ideas from other researchers in the field."

One of the highlights of their time at UP was the chance to present their research at various conferences. Looking ahead, René plans to build a career in academia, while Jean-Pierre aims to apply his research skills and problem-solving abilities in industry, where clear communication of complex ideas is crucial. They also plan to continue collaborating on research projects, with a current project involving co-authoring a paper.

For couples considering doing advanced degrees together, Jean-Pierre and René offer this advice: communication and understanding are key. They add that it's important to share household responsibilities and be aware of each other's stress levels; planning deadlines to avoid simultaneous pressures can also help maintain balance; and supporting each other through challenges and celebrating achievements together can make the journey more rewarding.

To celebrate this significant milestone, the couple spoilt themselves to a well-deserved vacation at their favourite destination, the Kruger National Park. "And for the future... we are patiently awaiting the arrival of our first-born next year," René concludes.

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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)