

New UP Veterinary Science graduate had no pets and was terrified of animals for years

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Dr Zandile Mbonxa was terrified of animals as a child and never had pets – but despite this she recently qualified as a veterinarian when she was awarded a degree from the University of Pretoria’s (UP) **Faculty of Veterinary Science**.

Dr Mbonxa, who was raised in Orange Farm, south of Johannesburg, is one of 11 000 UP graduates who were **awarded their qualifications in absentia** earlier this month during a virtual ceremony necessitated by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

She says she found out about veterinary science at high school in 2011. “There was a career awareness campaign by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. I always wanted to study human medicine, but I knew I would not have the funds, so I applied for the bursary they advertised and chose veterinary science because it was the closest thing to human medicine.

“The Department chose me out of the many applications it received, and that is how my journey to veterinary science began,” she says with a smile.



Dr Zandile Mbonxa treating a patient.

When Dr Mbonxa was in grade three, she witnessed a friend being attacked by five dogs, after which she was scared of dogs for years. She was raised by her aunt, as her mother, a domestic worker, lived with her employers, while her father worked as a delivery man. “He was hardly ever at home,” she says.

Dr Mbonxa started the first year of her six-year Veterinary Science degree in 2014 on UP’s Hatfield Campus, after she had achieved seven As in matric. She then moved to the Faculty of Veterinary Science’s Onderstepoort Campus. A big challenge was “the lifestyle change in first

year, which was a mission to get used to. Self-discipline was difficult and being in Pretoria all on my own with all the attention I got after passing matric very well was distracting. I became big-headed and almost forgot to work hard again,” she laughs.

The degree was tough going. “It is mainly basic science and maths modules in the first year. In the second year, we did anatomy and physiology, microbiology, animal science and animal behaviour. We were then trained in small animals such as dogs and cats, small stock such as goats and sheep, horses, pigs, poultry and cattle.”

In her fifth year, in 2018, she gave birth to a little girl and wrote her first two exams when she was 39 weeks pregnant. Fifteen days after the caesarean section birth, Dr Mbonxa wrote three more exams. “I was numb throughout the whole process, but all I wanted was to get to the finish line – and I did.”

She says her partner is the reason she persevered. He made sure she got the best medical care; he got her a full-time aid to help with the baby, and was emotionally present. Her determination and tenacity to finish the degree motivated her. “I knew where I came from, what it took for me to be where I was, and what my goal was. This kept me going.



Dr Zandile Mbonxa wants to open a clinic in Orange Farm that provides basic veterinary care.

“Remember, I said I was raised by my aunt? Well she is wheelchair-bound and has been for as long as I can remember. She in fact raised me and two of my sisters. She worked very hard and looked after our every need.” It was from this life experience that Dr Mbonxa learnt that nothing is impossible. “You can achieve anything that you set your mind to,” she says.

She is believed to be the first vet from Orange Farm and says she loves the profession. “Our patients cannot speak and tell us what is wrong with them, so they depend on us to make the correct diagnosis to improve the quality of their lives. That makes me feel that I have a special gift for special creatures.”

She adds: “I want to go out and enlighten and educate people in townships and rural areas about veterinary science and to inspire young people. I always say to people that one day I am going to

be the Minister of Agriculture and be the deciding voice,” she laughs, explaining that veterinary science is important for animal production and the economy.

For now, Dr Mbonxa wants to open a clinic in Orange Farm that provides basic veterinary care and which will also function as an education and training centre. Her fear of animals has been replaced by a love of them, especially for Labradors. “Most of my patients were Labradors, and I had the best time with them – they are so calm, very sweet and loving.”

- Author Primarashni Gower

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