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BSc Earth Science student graduates after defeating the odds

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After years of watching his single mother struggle to support him and his four siblings, Andile Mkandla (24) from Strand dropped out of school just after completing Grade 10. He worked at construction companies, the community scrap yard and later became a gardener in an attempt to assist his mother financially and save money for school.

"There is this one specific day that I will never forget, I was working in the garden of my then boss and he asked me to sit down with him for a quick chat over food. I picked a flower from his garden and started talking to him about pollination as well as everything I had learnt in school about flowers and plants."

Andile says his boss gave him hope and said it was never too late to go back to school, and from that day onwards, he started saving money for school fees and school uniform. "I went back to school the following year and because of my good grades, I was awarded R700 at Rusthof Secondary School for being a top achiever. I used that money to pay for my Grade 12 fees."

Despite having gone back to school, Andile continued to work at the scrapyard after school and weekends for that little bit of income to assist his mom with household necessities like electricity and food.

"I had amazing teachers – one of my teachers even became a mother to me. The situation at home was bad and our shack was too small for all of us, but my teacher was kind enough to take me in for the duration of my Grade 12 examination and we became family."

Andile's inspiring story is proof that 'dreams delayed are not dreams denied'- as he will be among the thousands of Stellenbosch University students graduating at the 2019 April graduation.

"Coming to Stellenbosch University has opened up a lot of doors for me. I worked at Ithemba Labs (National Research Foundation) in 2017, doing motivational talks and acting as a mentor for the learners who attend their Mathematics and Science classes. I also went on an excursion to the Antarctica in 2017; it was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

"I struggled a lot during my time as a first-year student; I struggled to find my way around the campus and struggled to get my hands on textbooks due to financial constraints."

Andile says his struggle taught him a lot and motivated him to start his own initiative whereby he mentors first-year students and collects books from former students to share with those who do not have.

"Having gone through all of that, I wouldn't want the next person to experience it because it was the toughest time for me in my academic career. I was fortunate enough to have people who helped me and tried to make things easier for me, people like Whitefield Estate Foundation who offered me a scholarship. And I have invited all of them to my graduation."

Andile is set on pursuing his MSc in Earth Science to enhance his research skills further in order to contribute to the enabling of a sustainable and environmentally friendly future.

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