Blind student realises his education dream

NOSIPHO MNGOMA

HE MAY have lost his sight, but he never lost sight of what he wanted in life.

After graduating with a Master’s degree in Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal yesterday, Phomolo Ramike is well on his way to realising his dream of developing himself, other students with disabilities and society at large.

The 28-year-old began going blind 15 years ago. He was partially sighted for five years before losing his sight despite a corrective operation.

Not wanting their son to miss out on a quality education, his parents moved him from Johannesburg to a school for the blind in Pietermaritzburg.

“Being away from home was challenging even though I was used to it since I have travelled often while playing basketball,” Rimike said.

The difficulties he faced, having to adjust to life with a disability after attending a school for able-bodied pupils all his life, was eased by the monthly visits from his supportive family. He adjusted well, learning how to read and write in Braille in time for the matric exams.

“My interest in development studies comes from my outlook in life: that there should be development and progress for the individual and the community at large.”

That’s why he chose a “practical” topic for his research, titled “Supporting Students with Disabilities: The Impact of the Disability Grant and NSFAS (the National Student Financial Aid Scheme) on Students with Disabilities at UKZN”.

“I had an amazing experience in matric at a school with all the facilities I needed. But when I got to university, I learnt that more institutional support was needed for people with disabilities.”

Over the years, Ramike has learnt to deal with the pressure of working that much harder.

“Having text converted to Braille would sometimes take weeks. This slowed me down, but we would sometimes have readings just to be on track and not get left behind,” he said.

While conducting his research, he interviewed students and got the voice recordings in Braille.

He grouped certain phrases and recordings into themes and then manually summarised and paraphrased. This was time-consuming, but he soldiered on in the hope that his research would have an impact on government officials and policymakers in improving institutional support for students with disabilities.