Car guard to doctor

Cameroonian immigrant overcomes poverty to reach for the stars

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WHEN Tembi Maloney Tichaawa, 36, stood on the stage to receive a doctorate in philosophy on Monday night, he cut a different image from the car guard, security officer and night porter he had been to pay for his studies.

Cameroon-born Tichaawa arrived in South Africa in 1997 with a "big dream".

Tichaawa, now a senior lecturer and researcher at the Walter Sisulu University and the director of the institution’s Centre of Excellence for Tourism Research, yesterday said he was “just a lad” with a high school education when he arrived in the country with a dream to be somebody great.

“I also wanted to contribute to society. I saw education as the key. Nothing was going to stop me. I was so determined to get to the top,” he said.

He soon discovered that tertiary education was not cheap.

“I started my new life in South Africa as a car guard. At the back of my mind I knew that my goal was to complete my education,” Tichaawa said.

After spending about eight months guarding cars in Cape Town, he was offered a job as a security officer at a hotel.


“It became more difficult because I could not concentrate and the fees were so high, but I never gave up,” he said.

Tichaawa was soon working inside the hotel as a night porter.

“I was pushing trolleys as a night porter for a few years and that's when I started to map my future and my education took off,” he said.

He managed to save enough to enrol for a tourism management diploma at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

After obtaining a degree in tourism and hospitality, Tichaawa enrolled for his master's in 2008. By then, his outstanding academic record had come to the attention of the dean of the university’s business faculty and Tichaawa was offered a position as a junior lecturer.

He completed his master's cum laude and studied towards a philosophy doctorate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Tichaawa's doctoral thesis examined the legacy of the 2010 Fifa World Cup on Africa, looking at stakeholder and soccer fans' perceptions in Cameroon and Nigeria.

Despite his academic success, Tichaawa has not forgotten his days as a car guard.

“I frequently chat to car guards, who I have become familiar with when I go out to buy food. They are intelligent, young and vibrant. And they are doing the job just to survive.

“I always tell them this job should be a temporary thing and advise them to do it with a smile and not feel sorry for themselves. I used to do it with a smile, knowing my determination would get me to the top.”

The married father of a six-year-old daughter and one-year-old son said while he felt a sense of fulfilment at his graduation ceremony in Durban on Monday, he knew there was more for him to do.

“My job is not yet done. We still have to build a society where we provide meaningful education, and I have to help work towards that,” he said.

DARE TO DREAM: Cameroon-born Tembi Maloney Tichaawa after being awarded a doctorate in philosophy on Monday. His thesis examined the legacy of the 2010 Fifa World Cup on Africa

Picture: UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

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