Ex-car guard obtains doctorate

By NIVASHNI NAIR

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

Cameroon-born Tichaawa arrived in South Africa in 1997 with a “big dream”. The 36-year-old is now a senior lecturer and researcher at Walter Sisulu University and director of the institution’s Centre of Excellence for Tourism Research.

Yesterday he 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 eventually had to strive for it. I started my new life in South Africa as a car guard, watching cars when the owners were in supermarkets for little change.

“At the back of my mind, I knew that my goal was to complete my education,” Tichaawa said. Almost eight months after guarding cars in Cape Town, he was offered a job as a security officer at a hotel.

“During that time, on the first anniversary of arriving in South Africa, I lost my mother. 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 mark my future and my education took off.”

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 degree in 2008.

By then, his outstanding academic record had reached the attention of the university’s Dean of Business 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 thesis examined the legacy impacts of the 2010 Fifa World Cup in 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 that this job should be a temporary thing and advised them to do it with a smile and not feel sorry for themselves.

“Because I used to do it with a smile, knowing that 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 fulfillment 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.