

Keaton Harris: Resilient journey to medical triumph

By [Hannelie Booyens](#)

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You could write a book about the heart wrenching obstacles Keaton Harris had to endure to get where he is today – graduating cum laude as a medical doctor at Stellenbosch University (SU).



Source: Stellenbosch University.

The little boy who grew up in a single-parent household where he and his mom struggled so much that he still remembers the week they survived only on a packet of NikNaks, always had only one dream: to become a doctor.

A scholarship to Camps Bay High School enabled Harris to get excellent matric marks, but initially none of his applications to medical schools across South Africa were successful. His mother Charlotte Sinclair's words of comfort at the time proved prophetic: "One day you will see why God doesn't want you to study medicine now — but trust me when I say that one day you will."

Harris decided to take a different route to realising his dream and registered for a Bachelor of Pharmacy degree at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

Charlotte, who worked as a beauty therapist for many years, had to sell all their furniture to afford her son's registration fees at UWC. Harris was deeply moved by his mom's sacrifices and decided to put every waking moment into studying as hard as he could.

He put in extra hours when his classmates were sleeping and never missed a class. "I knew what I wanted, and I went about making those dreams a reality," he says of the first difficult years as a student.

"I may burst into tears"

A decade later, Charlotte's eyes were beaming with pride as she accompanied her son to the Coetzenburg Centre on graduation day, 12 December. Before the ceremony, Harris said it still felt unreal. "I may just burst into tears when they call my name!" The previous day he had received an award for the top student in Family Medicine and Primary Care at SU.

Over the course of his studies, Harris collected an incredible 44 distinctions. In 2017 he completed his first degree summa cum laude at UWC, while also being named valedictorian, Top Pharmaceuticals Student and Top All Rounder.

Along the way he also found time to excel as a student leader. In 2015 he became the youngest recipient of the Abe Bailey travel bursary and in 2018 he was the only South African among 21 young people chosen globally for the Young Sustainable Impact intake that aims to help solve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. In 2018 he was also included in the prestigious Mail & Guardian 200 Young South Africans list.

Beyond enormous pride and relief that he's finally a doctor, Harris says he's deeply grateful for the help he has received over the past decade. Funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) enabled him to complete his first degree while a bursary provided the means to get through medical school at SU.



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Harris can recall the exact moment he knew he wanted to become a doctor. As he and his mom had moved around a lot during his turbulent childhood, she thought Harris would get some stability from joining the Boy Scouts.

The Scouts helped the insecure boy feel more confident.

"We learnt many skills including first aid training. The training came in handy one day when I was at New Somerset Hospital after having an asthma attack. That night the patient next to me had a seizure, I remember not panicking, thinking about what we had learned in first aid training and putting him in the recovery position.

"After a few minutes, a doctor came into the room and changed the trajectory of my life. He sat next to me and said that I should become a doctor because not everyone could do what I did. I remember feeling so good because I had helped someone. I had never felt such purpose before."

In an almost poetic arc to his journey, next year Harris will start his internship as a doctor at New Somerset Hospital, the exact same place where his dream was born.

The passion that fuelled the fire

Resilience and determination fed the fire in his heart throughout the years when studying felt like a never-ending marathon. "I've learnt you need to reinforce your willpower to remind yourself why you started the journey," Harris says.

"It's the passion to provide others with a second chance at life that fuelled my fire, and the knock-on effect was a strengthened degree of resilience and determination. Also, I knew there were people watching my journey. Yes, that on its own was stressful, but I was even more determined to prove to myself and others that I could persevere and succeed."

Harris confesses he hit rock-bottom a few times over the past decade and shortly before graduation he felt completely burnt out. "Ten years of studying is no joke, and I wish I could describe how tiring it was."



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"At times the additional weight of the practical-heavy requirements of medical school over and above pure theory became too much, but I pushed knowing that I'll (hopefully) get a bit more sleep a bit later in life!"

The resilient young doctor draws strength and inspiration from his past. He hopes to be able to eventually establish a bursary fund for people who want to study medicine. "Having gone through the struggles of wondering whether there will be food on the table has sensitised me to the daily struggles that many South Africans face. It's extremely expensive to study medicine and there just aren't enough bursaries for those who have the passion and the drive to become doctors."

"Having been immensely blessed to have zero student debt due to the kindness of organisations across South Africa, I want prospective doctors to focus on their academics, to understand that there is a life outside of medicine, and that without having the added stress of finances, they can expand themselves more than just professionally."

The two constants in Harris' life have always been God and his mom. He credits Charlotte for shaping him into the man he is today. "My mom and I have been through a lot, but during my studies it was as if I had both my mom and best friend walking next to me."

"Knowing I could always call her when I had a rough day, when a test didn't go the way I planned, or when I struggled to understand a concept, gave me a safety net that I could not be more grateful for."

"It inspired me to want to help others do the same, especially those who feel as lost as I felt when things didn't work out. My mom helped me push harder when I thought I'd reached my limit, and she often reminded me what I'm capable of."

Harris plans to make the most of his internship next year and he is looking forward to possibly specialising in orthopaedic surgery or sports medicine. He's also set another big goal for himself for 2024 – to start writing his autobiography which he plans to publish in 2025. Telling the story of how his dream was realised is bound to be an inspirational read.

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