

Doing it her way

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How Thuthuka changed my life - Ipfani Hope Singo's story

Ipfani Singo (29), known as Hope – a name that is apt for her story thus far - was one of the lucky people who had a clear vision of her future at an early age: she wanted to be a Chartered Accountant [CA(SA)] from as early as Grade 4, after hearing about it from her aunt and sister. Yet her journey to becoming a chartered accountant has not been easy for her. Thankfully Hope had Thuthuka to hold her hand.



Hope is from Thohoyandou, Limpopo. She first went to the Liivha Combined School and then moved to Khwevha Commercial High school where she excelled at commerce subjects such as mathematics, accounting, business studies and economics.

She praises her parents as early influencers on her path to success. "My mom, who is currently doing her PhD, has played a very significant role and influenced me not to give up on my dreams. My dad has also always reminded me that I can do what I set my mind on." Credit also goes to her religious faith and her solid support structure – "spiritually, mentally, emotionally and technically, that came through family, friends and the institutions I affiliated with" - for motivating her towards the milestones on her way. The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA), through its Thuthuka Bursary, has been one of those support systems.

When Hope started university (studying B.Acc – Accounting Science at the University of the Free State), she did so without a bursary. "My parents were paying and the university gave me money towards tuition, because my AP score was high. In my second year, I was offered an opportunity to join SAICA's Thuthuka bursary." Despite failing one module (commercial law) in her first year, Thuthuka accepted her.

"At Thuthuka, our programme director, Ms Annalie van der Merwe, became like a mom to me, as home in Limpopo was far away." At the residence, she also made friends with people who became like family.

"I managed to complete my undergraduate studies. However, I didn't meet the minimum average to make CTA." The Certificate in the Theory of Accounting (CTA) is a compulsory postgraduate programme for candidates who wish to eventually qualify as CAs(SA).

Hope was devastated. But she knew that along one's academic and professional journey you need cheerleaders. "It could be parents, family members, a friend, a lecturer and/or mentor: a solid support structure will carry you on days that you do not believe it is still possible to press on." Hope's lecturers played a significant role throughout her journey at the University of Free State – especially in her third year when her mom, her loudest cheerleader, was gravely ill for the better part of the year. Fortunately, her mother survived and was able to attend Hope's graduation the next year.

"Particularly grateful to lecturer and tax author Prof. Alta Koekemoer who pushed me then – and even today – not to not give up on my dream, because I'm closer than I've ever been."

Hope refused to give up on her dream. "I did a BCom Accounting Hons to make the CTA average. This time I was successful and I entered my CTA year in 2014. However, I then changed my approach in the way I studied, and it proved to work against me, with the result that I failed. I lost my funding and although I was offered a PWC bursary to continue with CTA in 2015, I don't think I was ready to make a positive decision, because I declined it."

Hope started work at the Auditor General of South Africa's (AGSA's) Free State office in 2015 as a SAICA trainee. "I completed my articles in 2018, without having obtained the CTA.' She is grateful that she received an audit clerk contract, since 'my business unit believed in me."

Later during 2015 she applied to be moved to the AGSA national office situated in Pretoria, because it meant being closer to her loved ones and her ailing mom in particular. She moved there in 2016. Her next step was her studies for the CTA at UNISA, but "sadly by that time, my priorities had shifted... Even though the Endunamoo private tuition was at my disposal, I didn't use that opportunity. As a result, I failed in 2016."

Then, in 2017, she enrolled at Endunamoo for study support. Her studies went very well, until she got married shortly after her final exams. "Due to marital challenges, I was not focused, and for the October finals I had accounting and tax supplementary exams. By December 2018 it was official that my marriage was also over. I prepared for my supplementary exams with little hope, but going back to my 2017 Endunamoo material assisted me a great deal. I finally passed the CTA in February 2019."

Shortly after her CTA graduation, Hope sat for her first attempt at the Initial Test of Competence (ITC) exam as one of the candidates attending the Thuthuka programme. Unfortunately, that attempt in June 2019 failed although she scored high enough to give her confidence that she could do it. She therefore enrolled with Endunamoo for their January 2020 preparation course, but still found it hard to study and stick to her programme. She failed the January 2020 ITC again, and could easily have lost hope at that stage.

But true to her name, this is when Hope met another successful Thuthuka graduate – Zanele Maduna CA(SA). "She was speaking at a webinar for ITC candidates and was so graceful to afford me an opportunity through a sponsored ticket. She didn't stop there; she adopted me as part of a group of students that she was coaching for the year. She helped me navigate my feelings and accept that I wasn't prepared enough. She pointed out that Endunamoo had an excellent programme and advised that I continue with them. Mostly, she helped me see that I needed to pick myself up, go back and try again."

Hope recalls: "Endunamoo took care of my technical skills, while Zanele helped me to work on my self-doubts and how to structure my studies. She emphasised the importance of focusing on the journey... Zanele is an amazing coach, she made me love things about me that I didn't understand. She changed my perspective and help me build my confidence by committing to my study programme and not making excuses."

Hope's November 2020 ITC attempt was successful.

Her next step is now preparing for the Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) – the second (and last) part of the qualifying examination, which assesses professional competence. To be eligible candidates must have passed ITC, completed 20-months of a SAICA registered training contract and successfully completed a professional programme. "I am looking forward to the experience!" says Hope. Clearly the influence of SAICA and Thuthuka has helped her to be confident in her current career and future plans.

Currently Hope is an executive assistant to AGSA Business Executive Polani Sokombela CA(SA). "I saw it as an opportunity to be shadowing in a strategic position while I continued my studies. We are responsible for managing a business unit that has 49 audits, 189 staff members and audit firms doing audits on behalf of the Auditor General of South Africa." Their business unit thus looks after a portfolio of audits that are in key sectors of the economy, and their responsibilities include managing regulatory audits, as well as interacting with top management, political role players and other role players. It also has responsibility for managing the quality and timelines of the balance score card of the business unit initiatives. "The balance scorecard include key performance indicators like managing audits in an effective manner and adding value to our auditees, people management, financial management, stakeholder management, vision and values of the AGSA."

She praises Mr Sokombela CA(SA) as well as her mentor, Ms Zolisa Zwakala (another CA(SA) working at the AGSA) for

their role in her development. "I will remain here until I qualify and would love to join our technical consulting team. My current role has exposed me many things, including the importance of good governance. Ms Zwakala reminds me that I have to remain accountable to the dream I had since I was in Grade 4 and that I have to do my best at any given task – big or small – to build my work ethic."

She adds: "The principle of learning and unlearning has changed my life for the good."

With the type of perseverance Hope has demonstrated along her journey to achieving her CA(SA), it is only a matter of time before she is able to sign add the CA(SA) designation to her business cards.

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