

Pursuing dreams through medicine:

Lebogang Usher Selepe's journey



Lebogang Usher Selepe

Lebogang Usher Selepe envisions a world where there is equal access to health and education. Lebogang is studying medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT). He matriculated at Phateng Secondary School in Mamelodi, Gauteng.

"No matter what obstacles you face, never lose sight of your dreams. Education is the key to unlocking endless opportunities, so take every chance to learn and grow."

Why did you choose medicine?

I chose medicine because it has been my wish to become a doctor ever since I was young. The idea of becoming a doctor and saving people's lives naturally exists in me. In preschool, when they would ask us what we want to be when we grow up, I would say I want to become a doctor. I grew up with that mentality and passion for alleviating people's pain and making them feel better. I chose medicine because it is what I am passionate about, although I had the option to study actuarial science, which is high paying. I chose to do something I will enjoy. I don't want to be in a workplace where I will feel like I don't belong, just because I am making money.

Who or what inspired you to pursue these studies?

Despite having this internal motivation to pursue this degree, I think there are other external factors that inspired me to pursue medicine. I come from Mamelodi, a township in Tshwane. There is a lack of healthcare facilities and clinics in Mamelodi. I noticed that the demand for healthcare is greater than the number of healthcare providers available, especially doctors. When I would go to the clinic, I would see a queue of about 50 – 100 people waiting to see one doctor.

When I was 10 years old, one of my favourite family members (my mother's uncle) passed away due to HIV/AIDS. I loved him so much, and when my mom reminds me of how I reacted when I was told that he passed away, she told me that I said, "If I was a doctor, I could have saved Malome Masipa." My mom explained to me that my uncle died because he did not want to take his medication, as there was a stigma around HIV at the time. When I heard that story, I was inspired to study medicine, not only to perform surgery but also to educate people about their health and fight the stigma around infectious diseases.

What would you like to see changed in the world, and how do you see yourself contributing to such a change?

I would like to change the inequality in terms of healthcare facilities and education. I envision a world where there is equal access to health and education. I see myself contributing to such change by serving underserved communities when I start practising medicine. In my second year, I am planning to volunteer to tutor grade 11 and 12 learners, if possible, at the schools where I come from.

Where did you complete your schooling?

Phateng Secondary School, located in Mamelodi. I can't really say much about my teachers, as we had a basic teacher-learner relationship, but there is only one teacher whom I will never forget. I think I am safe to say that she played a major role in getting me where I am, because she is the one who evoked my interest in mathematics.

When she started teaching at my school, I was in grade 10, and I was really doing terribly academically. I got

only 20% for my first test in mathematics, but my maths teacher never gave up on me and the class in general. She would go the extra mile to unpack basic concepts we were expected to know from earlier grades. In the second term after her arrival at the school, I was able to achieve my first-ever distinction in mathematics, and from then on, I never got anything less than 90% in mathematics. Upon realising my potential, I became more interested in achieving great marks across all my subjects and started improving.

What did you enjoy about physical science and maths at school?

I was able to interconnect the two subjects. I could basically apply my mathematical skills to solve problems. Teaching my peers also made me gain more interest in these subjects. What I liked about these subjects was that if you improve in them, all your other subjects will also improve, because mathematics improves your critical thinking skills and how to unpack a problem when solving it.

Why do you think some people have problems doing well in maths and science? What advice do you have for school learners who struggle with these subjects?

I think people do badly in maths and sciences because they have been told and programmed to believe that these subjects are difficult. They approach them with the mentality that it is not possible to excel in these subjects. I have seen most people giving up when they are not able to find solutions to problems. My advice to those struggling in these subjects is to seek support whenever you need help and look for programmes that provide extra tutorials in these subjects. I attended Kutlwanong Centre for Maths, Science and Technology.

Any tips for learners in grades 11 and 12?

For grade 11, I advise you to make the most of this year as you will need your grade 11 report when applying for tertiary institutions. For both grades 11 and 12, balance your studying of the subjects because you can get 100% in mathematics and physical sciences, but it would be meaningless if you fail Life Orientation. So make time for every subject, draw up a study timetable and stay committed to following it. Make use of previous question papers to get an idea of how questions are asked, form study groups, and study every day as if you are writing tomorrow.

What advice do you have for matriculants who have to apply for places in higher education institutions?

Apply to as many institutions as possible. Make sure you don't forget to apply for the National Benchmark Test (NBT) and chase the degree that you want, not the status of the university.

Understanding excellence – what makes an achiever?

To be an achiever, you must be able to set goals, work hard to achieve them, and persevere when facing obstacles. It's about having the courage to pursue your passions, even when the odds are against you. True achievement is not just about personal success, but also about making a positive impact on the world and uplifting those around you.

A message to South African youth

No matter what obstacles you face, never lose sight of your dreams. Education is the key to unlocking endless opportunities, so take every chance to learn and grow.

A message to the teachers at your schools

Thank you for building me and disciplining me to be the person I am today. If it wasn't for you, I would not have made it to where I am today, although the journey is still young. I wish you all the best with your current and upcoming students. I hope you lead them onto the right path as you did with me.

If you had one opportunity to speak directly to a very influential person, who would you choose and what would you say to them?

Minister of Finance, Mr Enoch Godongwana: I would urge him to prioritise investment in healthcare infrastructure and resources, particularly in underserved communities.

Article provided by the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF). Lebogang Usher Selepe is one of the students in the 2024 NSTF Brilliants Programme, which recognises at least 18 first-year students studying in the science, medicine, and engineering fields. A young man and woman are chosen from each of the nine provinces. These students must have received top marks in mathematics and physical science in the National Senior Certificate Examinations (grade 12) of the previous year. They are identified by the national Department of Basic Education and selected by the NSTF.