

Student Success Stories

BREAKING BARRIERS: DISTANCE, CULTURE & NEW PLACES

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My name is Phenyó Lewanika, I am 22 years old and currently in my third year of BA Law at Stellenbosch University. My journey has been deeply shaped and sharpened by my faith as a Christian, which continues to ground me and guide the way I relate to people and navigate challenges.

One of the biggest challenges I faced when I first came to Stellenbosch in 2023 was adjusting to life as an international student from Botswana. Though I had done boarding school in South Africa for my A-Levels, university was a different ball game. Moving to South Africa for my studies meant stepping into an entirely new environment away from the familiar, away from my family, and from my usual support structures.

At first, it was overwhelming: I felt the distance, the cultural differences, and the weight of starting over in a new place. What helped me overcome this challenge was the power of community and friendship. I made the choice to be intentional about putting myself out there by showing up, initiating conversations, lending a helping hand, and being present with people.

Through that, I found genuine connections, support, and belonging. My faith also played a big role in reminding me that I was not alone in the journey.

Often, we come into leadership and do not pace ourselves. We think that we have to go all in—which can be a good thing—but sometimes other things suffer. I have learnt a lot about self-care, and about how to deal with conflict, and the importance of community/support systems when being in leadership. Even though one may be in a team, they can feel isolated and many do not know how to navigate that feeling and what to do. I have been in spaces that were tough to be in, and I wish that I would have had someone who would have told me what to do. But I believe that I went through it so that I could be the person to help someone else.

If I could have done something differently, I would have focused even more on balance. Because I was open and intentional, I sometimes stretched myself too thin, trying to be there for others while adjusting to my own new reality. I've learned that being open also means knowing when to slow down, when to listen to myself, and when to give myself the same care I try to give others. That's the growth I continue to carry with me.

By sharing my story, I hope that other students, especially those coming in as international students or stepping into unfamiliar spaces, will see that they are not alone. It's easy to feel isolated when you're starting fresh in a new environment, but I want people to know that openness, intentionality, and community can change everything.

I also hope my story reminds people that vulnerability is not weakness. It's actually the bridge to meaningful connections. Sometimes the smallest step, like saying hello first, or offering help, or being honest about how you're feeling, can open the door to friendships that sustain you. Most importantly, I want this to encourage students to see that you can thrive, not just survive, when you embrace both people and the journey itself with courage and faith.