

Cuba-trained student who lost father, brother and two family members in a car crash wants to serve his rural Community and excel - in their honour

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Three years ago Mfanafuthi Brian Gasa was at the Latin America School of Medicine (ELAM) in Cuba, preparing for a test when he received news of an unthinkable catastrophe back home; his father, brother, uncle and cousin had perished in a car crash. Being thousands of kilometers away from home, that phone call from his other brother shattered his world. Tears streamed down his face, and a million thoughts and painful emotions surged through his body.

But thankfully, none of those were strong enough to extinguish his dream to become a doctor. Yesterday Gasa, 26, from Matimatolo, finally touched down on South African soil, along with 107 other fifth-year students (part of a total of 260) who are returning from Cuba to complete their studies. Now that he is one step closer to hearing the sweet melody of being called “Dr Gasa,” he wants to serve his rural community, build his mother a decent house and make his father and brother proud, albeit posthumously. This is Gasa’s story, in his own words:



“It was January 22, on a Friday. That weekend I received a call... I had a test for pharmacology, they told me my father was involved in car accident, my brother, uncle and my cousin... they all lost their lives. When I heard about it, I couldn’t believe it. I dropped the call. My brother called me again, and told me... It was hard. On the Monday, I went to write. They told me if I wanted to write later, I could. It was complicated because I couldn’t postpone the test, so I decided to go ahead. They even told me before I could come home for the funeral, that I could take a break from my studies so that I could grieve properly, and that I could come back and resume my studies later. I realised that since I had lost those people, I could not recover them. I decided that I could not afford to lose another year. But it was not easy. There were complications... I had some difficulties. Sometimes I bunked classes. I lost my love for school for a while. Things were not the same anymore. I don’t know where I got the strength from, but I made it. But in the fourth year, things got better. Even today, I think I’m okay. I want to get this degree, and complete the things that my father wanted to do but couldn’t. Since I have another young sister who is quite promising, my biggest goal is to take her to varsity so that she can pursue her studies. I also

want to build my mother a house, so that she can be happy. I want to make all those who are proud of me happy. I want to change the situation in my community. Matimatolo, where I'm from, is a rural area that needs support from people like us, who had challenges in life to change that environment.

Grateful for the love and support: The support that I received from people, especially my principal Mr TW Mabaso, from Busani High School in Matimatolo has been incredible. He's the one who helped me with the process of going to Cuba. He paid for my passport. He was transporting me from home to town everyday. Before going to Cuba, I asked him how I could thank him, and he said the only thing is to come back with that degree. That is what keeps me going. The support we've received from our MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, has been amazing. He has been like a father to us. For him, it's no longer a duty... it's not work. Even when he was in Cuba, he would come and give us all the support we need. It's hard to let such people down when they show how much they care about you. The support from people has been overwhelming. I don't even know how to thank them. Before I came to Cuba, I spent some time working as a merchandiser at various shops. There's this woman who asked me why I was doing this work as a merchandiser when I had such a good matric (pass). I told her I was waiting for my ticket to go to Cuba. The day before I went to Cuba, she took me to Pep and asked me to buy anything that I need. We got support from many people. We'd go door to door with principal, asking for a donation. There are a lot of people who helped make this dream possible. My message to them is that all their help was not in vain. We are coming back to support them. They will not regret their decision to help us. We will make them proud.

My message to the SA and Cuba Governments: I don't even know where to start. I once lost hope of becoming a doctor because in South Africa it is hard, even today, to get space in a university. So, this programme had helped us tremendously. I don't even know how to thank Presidents Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro for starting this programme, and Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma for supporting it. It has made things very easy for us who have come from the rural areas. We are very thankful for the opportunity. Without it, I don't think we would have realized this dream.

My future goals: I see myself specializing one day. I want to specialize in internal medicine because it groups all specialities together. You get to know medicine better. I don't want to have a situation where if there's a patient with a heart problem in front of me, then I don't know how to help them just because I specialised in urology, for instance."

On 01 August 2018, the Cuba-trained students will spend the next 18 months completing their studies at a South African university. Once they graduate, they will be placed at health facilities at the districts where they originate from, and start working.