

Moving closer to the screen

It would have been nice to drive a car, but he gets around with Uber taxis. It is all about patience and clear communication with those close to you, says Lungelo Mlangeni, an HSRC researcher who lives with a serious visual impairment.



It was not always like that. Lungelo Mlangeni was about 12 years old when his parents noticed that he was pressing his face close to his books.

“Both my parents wore glasses, so the obvious plan was to get me a pair. They took me to an optometrist and that was when it was discovered that it was not a regular eyesight problem, but a serious and progressive medical condition called keratoconus,” says Mlangeni who is a master’s intern in the HSRC’s HIV/AIDS, STIs and TB research unit.

The Pretoria Eye Institute describes keratoconus as a disease in which the eye’s cornea (the clear window in

front of the eye) bulges forward into a cone-like shape. The cornea helps the eye to focus; therefore, the shape change causes blurred and distorted vision.

“Initially, I could wear contact lenses, but later the condition worsened to the extent that the lenses could

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damage my eyes and that was when I started to struggle. It took me quite some time to adjust to the condition.”

Learning to listen

“In primary school, I was one of the smartest kids in my class, but in high school I struggled to see the board. It was a good school with small classes and I could still take notes, but at university, I stopped taking notes altogether. I got used to not being able to see properly and rather worked to improve my listening skills,” says Mlangeni.

His initial plan was to study geography, but he soon became more

interested in psychology, one of his elective subjects.

"I dropped geography and completed a degree in political science and psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, followed by my honours and master's degrees in research psychology. After that, I wanted to get into the real-world research environment and the HSRC was the obvious choice."

Finding independence

Mlangeni helps to collect and analyse data for the South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey and he also works on the HSRC's first national TB survey.

He takes pride in his independence, but laments the fact that some people still assume that people with visual impairments are slow or unable to do their jobs properly.

"I think they look at the way I have to read, coming so close to the screens and make assumptions about how competent I am. I see myself as smart and this just motivates me to work twice as hard.

"Most of the things I need to do, I can do, like walking and doing groceries. Probably the only thing that I find a bit cumbersome is that I can't drive. Uber helps, but it makes it difficult to get around. It would have been nice to have my own car.

"My advice to people in my position, who lose their sight, is to be patient with the transition towards doing things in a different way. Communicate with those close to you. It can be difficult for them to understand that you need space to grow, and they tend to worry and be over-protective."

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