

# Bursary propels a young lady into a career she loves

By Rotondwa Raligidima, Potatoes SA

**T**he Potatoes SA bursary recipient, Sophy Thaba, was born and raised in Mankweng, commonly known as Turfloop, in Limpopo. She lived there with her parents and three siblings. Sophy says her parents inspired and encouraged her to strive for the things she wanted, helped to develop her intellectually and taught her to respect others.

Raised in a family that embraces agriculture, Sophy could not help but fall in love with the industry at a young age. She assisted her parents with their backyard vegetable garden, which led to her realising early on that she wanted to pursue a career in agriculture.

## Finding a path

Upon graduating from high school, her mother encouraged her to enrol in an agricultural diploma course while she was contemplating a specific field. Sophy registered for a course in veterinary nursing at the University of Pretoria in 2010. Upon completing her diploma, Sophy realised she did not want to pursue this career path



*Sophy Thaba after receiving her BSc degree in agriculture (soil science) in 2018.*

and enrolled to study biochemistry at the University of Limpopo. She soon realised she was not interested in that course either, and took a gap year.

Sophy returned to university in 2014. She enrolled for a bachelor's degree in science in agriculture, specifically in the soil science programme, at the University of Venda. Sophy became a Potatoes SA bursary recipient in her third year in 2016 after having applied in 2015. She completed her degree in 2017.

The Potatoes SA bursary programme offered by the Potato Industry Development Trust (PIDT) is aimed at providing financial assistance to students in need who want to pursue a career in agriculture. The bursary enabled Sophy to pay her tuition fees, accommodation, study materials and meals.

## A life-changing opportunity

According to Sophy, the bursary significantly impacted her life because it allowed her to pursue her studies without worrying about finances. Potatoes SA also offered her the opportunity to attend its induction programme. She found the programme to be informative and gained a better understanding of the potato industry.

Sophy made Potatoes SA proud by winning awards for best performing student in soil science and agricultural studies. In 2017 she was appointed as a tutor in soil science to assist second- and third-year students.

Sophy currently works at the University of Venda as an assistant teacher. She started working as an intern in 2018 through an internship programme sponsored by the National Research Foundation (NRF). After her internship, she continued her education at the same university and applied for an MSc in agriculture

(soil science). She was appointed on a fixed contract in 2020 and now teaches soil chemistry, soil fertility and plant nutrition.

## Paying it forward

Sophy appreciates the bursary she received from Potatoes SA and all the opportunities and exposure that came with it. She says that being part of the Potatoes SA programme enabled her to travel to different provinces to attend Potatoes SA events and visit different farms. The most memorable experience was visiting a fresh produce market where she learned about potato quality checks, grading and packaging.

Sophy's gratitude reflects in her work. "I always recommend the bursary to my students and some have even been awarded the bursary for a master's programme," she says. "The bursary offers both financial assistance for undergraduates and postgraduate research funding, so applicants who are interested in potato research would benefit from this fellowship."

## A bright future

Sophy is passionate about academic work. She is fulfilled by the process of learning and passing knowledge on to others through lectures and practical work. She hopes to pursue a PhD degree in future.

Sophy encourages struggling students by saying: "Think about what you really want to do. It can be anything, big or small. Once you've decided on your goals, develop systems and habits to work towards them. Take small steps and you're good to go." 🍀

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at fresh produce markets in 2023

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EN OOS-VRYSTAAT**

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in context