

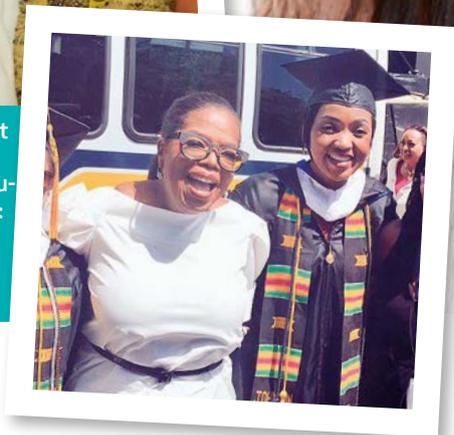
SHE'S LIKE A MOM TO ME

Nompumelelo has just graduated from a US university – and ‘Mam Oprah’ was there to cheer her on!

By MABALE MOLOI



Nompumelelo Nobiva (middle) with her biggest supporter, media mogul Oprah Winfrey (left), and Lavern Chatman Brown, with whom Nompumelelo stayed while studying in the US. RIGHT: Oprah was at her side when Nompumelelo received an honour's degree from the Johnson C Smith University this year.



IT WAS a bittersweet moment. As Nompumelelo Nobiva stood on the podium to receive her honours degree at Johnson C Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, USA, more than anything she wished her mother could be there to see how far she'd come from the township shack in which she was born.

But as she looked into the crowd she could see someone else clapping and cheering. Fans would know this woman's distinctive voice anywhere. To television viewers she's Oprah Winfrey, the chat-show queen, but to Nompumelelo (23) she's "Mam Oprah", her other mother, the one who took her under her wing at age 13 and changed her life forever by offering her a place at her Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in Henley on Klip near Johannesburg.

After seeing the long road Nompumelelo had walked there was no way O would have missed the celebrations. She was there with her partner, author and busi-

nessman Stedman Graham (or Uncle Stedman as her former pupil refers to him), looking every inch the proud mom as she watched Nompumelelo tottering up to the platform to receive her degree in the stylish nude wedges she'd bought her.

But before the ceremony kicked off the talk-show titan helped to get everyone into the spirit of the occasion by delivering the commencement address. It was typical Oprah (62). In her inspirational speech she spoke about the importance of doing the right thing even when no one else is watching. She also talked about her belief that there are no mistakes in life, just opportunities to learn from choices made in order to make better decisions next time.

And watching her was a beaming Nompumelelo. For her this isn't all empty talk – they're words to live by.

“WHY should I accept you into my school?” This was the question Oprah (62) asked Nompumelelo a decade ago.

“Because I want a better life than the one my mother had,” the teen replied. With those 12 words Nompumelelo booked herself a spot at Oprah's academy in 2007 and her life was changed irrevocably.

Her mother, Nonhlanhla, had been 17 when she'd given birth to Nompumelelo in Zonkizizwe township in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng. She never knew her father. Later she and her mom moved to Rosettenville, Johannesburg, where Nompumelelo attended Rosettenville Central Primary.

But at age eight she received tragic news. “I remember coming home from school and I realised my mom had a rash, her hair had fallen out and she was coughing a lot,” Nompumelelo says. The concept was hard for the little girl to grasp but her mom explained she was dying.