

Georgia Southern University

Digital Commons@Georgia Southern

Newsroom

Office of Strategic Communications &
Marketing

12-13-2019

Newsroom

Georgia Southern University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/newsroom>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Strategic Communications & Marketing at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Newsroom by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

From apartheid to academia, Georgia Southern graduate student beats odds to earn degree

December 13, 2019



When Debra Maskeo Runge was born, she was so small that she could fit into a shoebox.

Runge was born several weeks premature in Johannesburg, South Africa, and her 16-year-old mother claimed she was unaware of the pregnancy. Being black in South Africa during apartheid, a system of institutionalized racial segregation in the country, Runge was born in a designated black hospital that was not equipped with proper equipment such as incubators to allow her lungs to finish developing in the hospital. With a low chance of survival, it was determined that the baby's grandmother would take her to her place of employment in the suburbs where she served as a live-in maid for a prominent white woman.

The first few weeks of Runge's life were critical, and both her grandmother and her grandmother's employer, Doreen Benjamin, kept her wrapped in blankets.

"Miraculously, I survived," Runge said.

Benjamin expressed to Runge's grandmother that she would like to help raise the baby girl, and she remained in the suburbs. Because of apartheid, however, there were no nearby public schools that would allow Runge to attend, requiring her to attend a private school. She enrolled in Roedean School, a prestigious, all-girls school in Johannesburg, from elementary through the first two years of high school.

"At some point I started to become aware of my background," Runge said. "All of the students came from very wealthy families. They had the latest gadgets and fancy homes and their parents had nice cars. My mother was a maid, so we couldn't afford much of anything. Doreen paid my school fees, but I had to rely on other parents to get me home as she worked until late. My mother would take me to school in a minibus taxi, a form of transport used by the low-income population. So I would insist on leaving early so no one would see me getting out of a taxi."

At the start of the eighth grade, Runge was faced with another challenge. Benjamin was moving to Cape Town, but she offered to take Runge with her. However, her grandmother would not be going with them. The decision meant that Runge would either stay in Johannesburg and have to attend the closest boarding school, requiring residency on the school grounds, or move away from the only mother she had ever known to live with Benjamin and continue attending private schools.

"Either way, I was not going to get to see my mother," Runge said. "So I chose to move with Doreen because she was like family to me, and it was the best choice academically."

Although the decision was a difficult one, Runge found great success in her new private school and went on to attend Rhodes University nearly 900 miles away from anyone she knew. After completing a bachelor's degree in political science and sociology as well as an honors degree in social development, Runge decided to continue exploring the world. To fund her travels, she taught English as a second language (ESL) in Europe and

South Korea. In South Korea Runge met her husband, Scott Jacob, a national guardsman from Savannah, Georgia, who was also teaching English. In 2016, Jacob and Runge moved to Savannah where they were married and recently had their first child, Savannah Jane.

Since being in the Lowcountry, Runge became an ESL instructor at Savannah Technical College. Her desire to grow and advance in this career path along with encouragement from the then-dean of adult education at the college led Runge to pursue a master's in adult education at Georgia Southern University on the Armstrong Campus.

"The program has given me a more in-depth view into teaching adults," she said. "I have been able to introduce new materials and instructional techniques to my classroom with the insight gained in the master's of adult education program at Georgia Southern."

Having taught middle schoolers during her time in South Korea, Runge enjoyed the challenge and opportunity to work with adults.

"English as a second language adults want to learn," Runge said. "Because if they can't speak English, they can't participate in basic communication, and it becomes frustrating. They cannot talk to their children's teachers or doctors. I relate to this from my three years in South Korea.

"My students come every day ready and eager to learn," she added. "They are appreciative and thankful, and I can see how I am helping them every day. We are one big happy family."

Looking back at her life, Runge says that she owes her success to her grandmother and Benjamin.

"On the day I was born, I lost a biological mother but gained two mothers who raised me, and I credit as being my 'parents,'" she said. "Both of them are strong-willed women. This is where my drive comes from."

When Rudge walks across the stage at the Savannah ceremony of the Georgia Southern Fall 2019 Commencement, she will have once again beat the odds. In South Africa, nearly half of school-aged children do not attend educational institutions. Only nine percent of black South African students have received post-secondary education, according to the national statistical service of South Africa.

Rudge plans to continue to work with ESL students and hopes that she can one day become an administrator who develops curriculum and programs for students working to learn English.

"Between my mom and Doreen, they gave me the right tools and guidance to succeed," Rudge said. "The biggest changes and challenges in my life have enhanced my development, and I plan to continue to learn more and challenge myself."