



South Africa A Remarkable Country in Transition

By Kathi Smith

In the summer of 1995, I traveled to South Africa as part of a group of 12 Oregon educators. The trip was funded by a Fulbright-Hays Groups Project Abroad Grant and by the U.S. Department of Education, and was sponsored and led by American Heritage Association. The purpose of the project was to learn about the new and evolving South Africa. In order to teach our students and colleagues about this country in transition, we had the opportunity to witness, first hand, conditions in that part of the world. The following is a reflection upon my experience.

The journey for the South African people is long and challenging with many twists unique to their country. The new government, led by Nelson Mandela, has brought black people into the democratic process, but it needs to build an infrastructure to provide these people with proper nutrition, jobs, job training, good schools and health care. Because blacks form the majority of the country's 44 million in population, building this infrastructure is a monumental task. There are seven official languages, and 97% of the peoples' mother tongue is not English although English is the language of commerce. Cheryl Heynes, a lecturer at Vista University, shared these thoughts with me, "With all the wealth, knowledge, resources, and brain power you have in the States, you still have many problems. If you take one hundredth of your resources and multiply your problems by a thousand, you've got South Africa.

During the apartheid years, which began in 1948 when the National Party came to power, there was a hierarchy among the peoples of South Africa which determined who would receive supplies and other opportunities in the school. Whites held the top position, coloreds (anyone who was neither white nor black) the middle, and blacks the bottom. Thus books and other supplies, if there were any at all, had to pass through the other two "ranks" before blacks could receive them. Because of the lack of opportunities and supplies, black students were often not equipped to pass exams for university.

Today, South African rural communities still have sparse resources and extreme overcrowding. The schools we visited ranged from the best to the worst in terms of supplies, teacher training, student-teacher ratio, and facilities. Many schools were without electricity, and it was common to see a classroom of 40-60 students

ranging from ages 13-20 with one teacher, the only supplies being paper and a pen or pencil. The starkest school that I observed had thirteen classrooms for 1,435 students and four dilapidated pits toilets. Many of the teachers had been given minimal training and were expected to teach in a language other than their mother tongue. Almost all the poorer schools, however, were working hard to deliver a good education with what little they had. When we had a chance to talk to teachers, they were welcoming and forthright about their educational circumstances.

South African schools with fees have more resources (libraries, computers, supplies) and smaller classes than those without fees. Without apartheid, color of skin is no longer a reason a child can be prohibited from attending any school of his or her choice; but.....economics is. If you can't pay the fees you don't attend those schools.

In the schools that we visited, students dressed in uniforms, followed directions without dissension, often sat two or three to a desk, and seemed cheerful during recess despite the absence of play equipment. And....they loved to sing. Every school day began with a prayer and singing. How I reveled in listening to them harmonize! In one school, I had the opportunity to teach a hymn class. (There is no separation of church and state in South Africa.) I opened the hymnal to a Good Friday hymn with which I was familiar.

The students, age 13-20, had never heard this song and within five minutes they knew the melody and resonated with harmony. I 'teared up!' I recorded them because they had not heard themselves before. It was an incredible experience. When I had the opportunity to teach in the primary schools, I always taught music and the response was enthusiastic!

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO'S) are grass roots organizations working to provide much needed services such as education, proper nutrition, housing, and job training. Some of these organizations focus on educational opportunities for black students and teachers. One such organization, Promat, located just outside of Nelspruit, helps black students prepare for university entrance exams as well as assists classroom teachers in strengthening their teaching styles and school curricula. The day I visited Promat, teachers were working in cooperative groups learning math and science instructional techniques. They were finding ways to make manipulatives with items found at home since there is no money for purchased supplies. One classroom we visited at Khayna College, an NGO in Cape Town, had one white board, a long table, and few chairs. The library was sparse, and the rent on the building was expensive.

During my time in South Africa, one thing became very apparent to me; whether the school was rural and overcrowded or wealthy and full of resources, one of the universal attributes of the students was the showing of manners and respect. I have

never witnessed such polite students. It has brought the word "manners" back to my teaching vocabulary.

Never have I seen such a strong spirit of determination as demonstrated by the people of South Africa. Like making a hand-sewn quilt in which each piece tells a story and is vital to the whole, the people, with their own special talents and passions, are creating a new South Africa.

I hope to have piqued your curiosity about South Africa. There is so much more I could share with you, so write or call me if you have questions or information to share!

I leave you with this quotation:

"Here's the monument the Afrikaners (former white oppressors) built for themselves keeping us outside," Mike, a black man in his 20's, said as we stood on the steps of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria. Another onlooker asked "What kind of monument would you like to build now that you're free?"

"Our monument is our lives," Mike replied, and then continued, "The struggle continues, but for different things. Change takes time. You can't change people like you change tablecloths. We grew up thinking whites were superior, gods. Our mamas didn't have to tell us to polish and clean our shoes, put clean clothes on and look our best when we went to town or school or any place white folks were. We just knew. We heard it at school and in town. When we went into town we were quiet. We didn't have the same opportunities. When other kids were picking up a racket to play tennis or a ball for soccer we were picking up stones and petrol cans for the cause (freedom from apartheid)."

Mike finished with "Why is it when white folks fight they're called heroes, and when we fight it's called violence?" We stood silent. What could we say? "Ya know," he added, "one thing I'm really proud of is how we all fought for the cause."

