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Police officer seeks truth in South Africa

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TREVOR HAGAN / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS Staff Sgt. Bob Christmas hopes his studies will inform his policing in Winnipeg.

Maybe the distance between resurrecting a nation from apartheid to gaining people's trust on Winnipeg's streets isn't so far.

Winnipeg Police Service Staff Sgt. Bob Christmas -- who's working on his second master's degree -- will be one of 13 students from Winnipeg leaving Tuesday for Cape Town for an intensive three-week

course on South Africa's truth and reconciliation process.

"Studying in-country will be really fascinating... just gaining so much insight," Christmas said Thursday. "I hope to learn about the parallels, the lessons learned there that apply to Canada.

"I hope to learn about trust-building, ideas I can bring to policing."

There will be 13 undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba and six South African students taking the summer course. The project was initiated by the U of W's Global College, U of W officials said.

"My professional interest is learning how to build trust with the aboriginal community. This course gives me a deeper understanding of people's perspectives and the value of human dignity," said Christmas. "It is about the true meaning of justice, in the broader sense of the word -- social justice."

Christmas has a masters' degree in public administration and is one-third of the way through a second in peace and conflict studies.

The field course takes students from Cape Town to Johannesburg, immersing them in South Africa's post-apartheid experiences and efforts at truth-telling, memorialization and reconciliation. Reconciliation projects, ranging from community-based initiatives to legislated undertakings such as truth and reconciliation commissions, will be examined in depth.

"I want students to get a richer understanding of how South Africa is dealing with the difficult legacy of apartheid," said Dean Peachey, vice-principal of Global College and course instructor. "I hope students will apply those insights to the challenges Canadians are facing after centuries of conflict between aboriginal people and other Canadians."

For a guy aiming at a PhD in peace and conflict studies, Christmas came late to scholarly pursuits.

"I quit school at 15," he said.

Christmas eventually walked away from a job in the sheriff's department to concentrate on a bachelor's degree he'd been working on for seven years, so he could qualify for the police force.

Christmas, 49, and his wife have four teenagers. "I've spent thousands of hours reading along soccer fields and basketball courts," he said.

Global College is seeking funding to bring South African students to a course here in the summer of 2012, with a focus on aboriginal experiences, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the opening of Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

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