

Canstar Community News - ONLINE EDITION

South Africa trip gives students hope

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PHOTO COURTESY OF COLIN BOURRIER [Enlarge Image](#)

Colin Bourrier (centre row, fourth from left) and Bob Christmas (centre row, second from right) are among the students pictured during a recent visit to South Africa.

A police officer's desire for social justice prompted a recent trip to South Africa to learn about racial segregation and living in a post-apartheid world.

Staff Sgt. Bob Christmas, 49, of the Winnipeg Police Service, was among 13 graduate and undergraduate students from Winnipeg who recently visited the African nation learn to learn about a society living in the shadow of apartheid and how reconciliation is a crucial part of the healing process.

The University of Winnipeg Global College initiated the course, which included students from the University of Manitoba. The contingent was joined by six South African students, as the program is offered in partnership with the Cornerstone Institute in Cape Town.

Apartheid was a system of legal segregation enforced by the nation's National Party government from 1948 to 1994, which inhibited the rights of non-white South Africans, which make up the majority of the population. Legislation classified individuals into racial groups, such as white, black and coloured.

Christmas — who works in the Tuxedo area and lives in Charleswood — said there is an important parallel between South Africa and Winnipeg when it comes to different communities working together.

"Working in policing, I really support the police chiefs working to build bridges with the aboriginal community," Christmas said.

"Today's social problems are so big, that no one organization can tackle the situation alone. We can often take a leadership role, but to be effective, we really need to partner with the community."

Christmas, who has four teenagers, is studying for his master's degree in peace and conflict resolution studies. Despite having visited South Africa before, he was no less shocked as he learned about the implications of apartheid and then analyzed the role of police in Winnipeg.

"I'm often self-critical, but I feel we're making efforts to bridge gaps with the aboriginal community, although we still have a long way to go in my opinion," Christmas said.

"Today's social problems are so deep and complex, that we need to work together as a community at large. From a humanity perspective, and as an officer with 23 years of experience, I know that anyone has the potential to change the world. But we need social justice and things like equal health, education and employment come first."

The two-week field course started in Cape Town and ended in Johannesburg. Students undertook a selection of reconciliation projects, while learning how to communicate their thoughts and feelings about the impact of apartheid.

"One of the special things about the trip was how we would all sit in sharing circles and talk about the effects of apartheid in South Africa and residential schools in Canada," said student Colin Bourrier, who was also on the trip.

Bourrier has a personal connection to South Africa, as his mother left there as a teenager with her family to escape the sanctions of apartheid.

"The main reason my grandparents decided to come to Canada was because they were classified as coloured," said Bourrier, 20, who hopes to pursue a legal career in human rights or international law.

Bourrier, who lives in Sturgeon Creek, said the trip was a chance to share ideas and experiences — and return home with a new perspective.

"We met with different speakers and went to a lot of places with historic meaning. I came back with a real desire to keep learning. Even though apartheid ended, it's still eye-opening looking at the world so differently," Bourrier said.

"Understanding history and different events can make you more critical, in terms of your thinking."

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