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A journey of the heart

Thirteen University of Winnipeg students travelled to South Africa for an emotional living history lesson in post-conflict reconciliation

BY: MARLO CAMPBELL
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PHOTOS BY COLIN BOURRIER [ENLARGE IMAGE](#) Last month, 13

Confronting the legacy of apartheid: Robben Island Prison where Mandela was imprisoned (top) ; a sign on display in the District Six Museum in Cape Town (below)

Winnipeg university students travelled to

South Africa for a unique field course in post-conflict reconciliation. A living history lesson, the experience not only proved to be an emotional journey through a country still coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid — a system of racial

segregation and discrimination that was formalized into law in 1948 and lasted until the early '90s — but also a chance to reflect on Canada's troubled past and the path to reconciliation within our own borders.

Initiated by the University of Winnipeg Global College, the whirlwind, two-and-a-half week course saw the Canadian students join up with six college students from Cape Town's Cornerstone Institute. The group travelled 1,400 kilometres from Capetown to Johannesburg, visiting memorials, museums and other locations along the way — among them, Robben Island, the prison in which Nelson Mandela served 18 of the 27 years he would ultimately spend incarcerated for his role as an anti-apartheid activist. (Released in 1990, Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994.)

Colin Bourrier and Bob Christmas were among the Winnipeg students who took part in the course.

Bourrier, a 20-year-old, third-year student working towards a bachelor's degree in conflict resolution, had a personal connection to the subject matter: his mother was born in South Africa into a mixed-race family; she moved to Canada with her parents and brother in the mid-'70s.

"It was really interesting for me to go there and to get this broader understanding of my past and my family's story," Bourrier says.

Christmas, a 49-year-old staff sergeant with the Winnipeg Police Service, is working on a master's degree in peace and conflict studies, having previously completed a master's in public administration. He enrolled in the course hoping to learn practical ways police can build trust with Aboriginal people and other marginalized communities.

Christmas says a visit to Soweto, a densely populated cluster of Black townships outside Johannesburg, was particularly moving. Soweto was the site of an infamous 1976 incident in which police opened fire on a student protest; hundreds were killed, including 12-year-old Hector Pieteron, whose dying moments were captured in a now-iconic photograph.

As a white police officer, Christmas says he struggled with feelings of guilt by association.

"I could understand the dynamic of the situation that allowed that to happen but, at the same time, I know there's no excuse for those deliberate acts, especially the things that went on — the abductions, the torture, the murders — through apartheid. It's hard to get your head around, but that was a deeply moving thing for me."

In 1995, South Africa launched a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bear witness to the human-rights violations committed during apartheid. As part of their course, students met with one of the TRC commissioners, as well as with authors, professors, archivists and citizens who lived through apartheid.

Many of the stories were hard to hear.

"There's a lot of people walking around with a lot of scars and guilt over all the crazy things that happened," Christmas says. "It's very raw."

Canada launched its own TRC in Winnipeg last year. Its aim is to create a historical record of the Indian residential school system — established in the late 1880s in an attempt to assimilate Aboriginal people into mainstream society; a policy referred to at the time as "killing the Indian in the child" — in order to educate Canadians about the abuse and neglect suffered by many of the 150,000 children who attended the schools, and guide a process of healing.

Bourrier recalls emotional sharing circles in which students shared insights about their countries' attempts at reconciliation.

"We were relating a lot of it to our own TRC and Aboriginal peoples," he says. "At the same time, we were asking them questions about South Africa. It was almost a bridge that was created between us."

Christmas says he was struck by the indifference some South Africans have to the ongoing suffering of their fellow citizens — an indifference he sees mirrored in Canada. "We have people living on reserves in third-world conditions, and most people go to bed in a middle-class home not thinking about that," he says.

While he gained insights that will help him in his policing career, Christmas says the experience was more about personal growth than professional development.

"I thought I was going to be learning about the politics of oppression and social injustice," he says. "It turned out to be more of a journey of the heart."

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