

Carl Owens Summer 2008 Report

Targeting Talent at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Sponsored by the Class of 1978 Foundation and the Class of 1995 Summer Service Fund

For the second year, I spent the summer volunteer with the Targeting Talent, Investing in Excellence, Facilitating Success initiative sponsored by the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I came Johannesburg in order to organize a journalism workshop where all 271 learners participating in our program would help produce a newsletter documenting their experiences with the Targeting Talent. Though our students are referred to as learners, they also hold tremendous potential as educators. I offer one illustration of this potential from my experiences this summer.

In one edition of the local Sunday *Times*, there was a news item that struck me with particular resonance. Headlined, “Hunting down the foreigners,” Victor Khupiso’s article was an examination of the xenophobic violence that erupted across South Africa earlier in the year. Khupiso led with a quote from one of his vigilante informants: “I can proudly say foreigners had decided to leave our area because they know what would happen to them if they are found. They would burn. Hell is waiting for them.” The words are certainly disturbing and easily caught me off guard. Though I expected to witness tensions during my stay in Johannesburg, the last place I expected to encounter violent hatred of this sort was in a community of black Africans—toward other black Africans.

Yet in a nation where the traumas of apartheid live fresh in many peoples’ minds, it’s not entirely surprising to find that ethnic anxieties manifest in fascinating ways. Observing my students this past summer helped elucidate this point. I asked one of the guys, who I knew to be unceasingly respectful—but never shy, why he didn’t seem to be a part of the crowd. He explained that he was not from the area and didn’t speak Zulu, the language the other students used to converse. Kuphiso’s article explained how language was used to easily distinguish foreigners from native South Africans, and built a better understanding of why he had been so hesitant, not knowing what reactions may follow if word spread of his distinguished background.

Fortunately our students realized how misinformed these kinds of fears were, and actively spoke against them when offered the opportunity. My students were all entered in to a music competition where they were charged with the task of writing lyrics to accompany a distinctly South African beat. Their entry would be rated against 9 others, with one ultimately being named the winner as selected by a panel of judges. I have enclosed a copy of their lyrics below. They challenge each of us to reflect on our own actions and take responsibility for combating prejudice, and for creating lasting positive change.

In a summer marked by fears of those things foreign, my students reminded me how important it was to understand the universality of certain experiences. Anxieties about the first day of class, nervousness over being away from home for the first time, and the look of elation that comes across a student’s face after finally figuring out the technique behind a difficult problem in math class are all examples of this shared experience; as are the dreams and goals these young people have set out for themselves. The Targeting Talent program counts among its ranks promising chemists, doctors, lawyers, biomedical engineers, artists, astronomers, and numerous future leaders. These learners are South Africa’s future, and I am grateful to have had the chance to share in their education.



Figure 1. My students rehearse their presentation titled, “Where Do We Go?” The lyrics are reproduced below.

Where do we go?

A Sxaxambishi (Focus) Production

Hook:

Oh, Oh, Oh...x4

Where do we go?...x4

Chorus:

Siyabonga Baba (Thank you Lord)

Ikhaya elihle (A beautiful home)

I-Africa yethu (Our Africa)

Siyathokoza Baba (We are joyful Lord)

Ma-Africa wethu (our fellow Africans)

Masihlanganeni (let us unite)

Re be ngata etee (and be one)

Re leboge bohle (let's all be grateful)

Verse:

With all the pain, tears, blood spill

And all the sufferings

They still had hope that there

Will come a day where freedom ain't just
a word

But a reality

Where love will be embraced

And colour ain't a matter

Because whether you are black, white, or
purple

We are all humans with blood flowing in
our veins

Today the choice is ours

If they did it so can we

The question everyone should ask
themselves is

Where do we go?



Figure 2. Targeting Talent students completed a rigorous math and science curriculum during their stay at the University of the Witwatersrand.



Figure 3. Two of our learners noticed a timely demonstration against xenophobic violence in South Africa.



Figure 4. I reconnect with Mordekai and Promise, two of my students from last year's session.

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Figure 5. Myself with Zena Richards, Program Director for the Targeting Talent Project at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.