A Brave New World: CBB Cape Town students find inspiration in a nation in flux

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A Brave New World

CBB Cape Town students find inspiration in a nation in flux

By Gerry Boyle ’78 • Photos by Irvine Clements

You spend days interviewing, observing, scribbling in notebooks, holding up a tape recorder. Later you pore over notebooks and tapes, sift the wheat from the journalistic chaff, search for that one moment, that single situation, that pearl-like utterance that captures precisely the spirit of the subject, the place, the story.

If you’re writing about Cape Town and the Colby-Bates-Bowdoin program based in the city, there are too many choices.

The lead could be Noah Lambie, a free-spirited Bowdoin junior, hustling around a new schoolyard basketball court in a crime-ridden Cape Town township where lay-ups are an enticement to keep kids out of gangs—and alive.

Or it could be Zelda Jansen, the program’s resident director, navigating the narrow lanes of a colored township and saying that even 15 years ago she never dreamed that the apartheid government would fall. “We didn’t even smell democracy,” she said.

Or maybe Kristen Heim, a Colby junior who, when she first arrived in race-based Cape Town society, used her fingers to put quotes around the term “colored,” commonly used in South Africa. “In my first host family, they said, ‘After a couple of weeks the quotes will come off,’” Heim said. “They did.

In Cape Town, contrasts and contradictions abound. It’s a beautiful cosmopolitan city complete with a Ferrari dealership—and the abject poverty of sprawling squatter settlements. It carries with it still an abhorrent racist legacy, yet African-American students who have been to Cape Town talk of finding for the first time escape from the subtle racism of America.

Cape Town is a place where unquenchable optimism springs from the violence and poverty of the racially segregated townships like wildflowers after a forest fire. It’s a city set like a jewel into a crown of roan-colored mountains that overlook white-sand beaches and turquoise seas; yet in the downtown, glue-sniffing beggar children sleep on the sidewalks like litters of puppies. When CBB students take to the townships for community service, they are venturing where many white South Africans have never set foot even once.

“There isn’t any such thing as ‘life in Cape Town,’” said Colby History Professor James Webb as he wound up his first semester at the CBB center last fall. “There’s only life in Cape Town depending on the neighborhood you live in and the racial group you fall into.”

Administered by Bowdoin (as the CBB London Center is by Colby and CBB Quito by Bates), the Cape Town program was conceived four years ago by a steering committee that included professors Randall Stakeman, a Bowdoin Africanist; Catherine Besteman, a Colby anthropologist; and Charles Nero, professor of rhetoric, from Bates.

Cape Town Encounters

Not all of the education in Cape Town is planned. Much of it comes in the form of unexpected and even serendipitous encounters like these selected from the reporter’s notebook:

On a tour of Cape Point National Park.

George Kleyn’s knowledge of the Cape Peninsula is encyclopedic. A retired high school teacher, he turns a tour of the area into a lesson in botany, geology, history, civics. The Cape Point National Park, he says, is home to hundreds of different species of heather. The mountains in the region are “a botanist’s paradise.” Yet for all of its vastness and diversity, numbers are also at the root of South Africa’s problems, he says. Millions of people have come from the north and east to the Cape Town region, but there are few natural resources or industries to support them. Unlike the United States during its westward expansion, South Africa is hemmed in by oceans and poverty. “Where are people going to go?” he says, pausing from his recital of the Cape’s attributes. “This is the Third World. It’s just not us.”
South Africa, then just five years into its post-apartheid life, offered students an opportunity to witness history being made. The Nelson Mandela-inspired victory over the apartheid government handed the people of South Africa a country that was in some ways ravaged but in many ways a blank canvas. Still racially segregated today by custom and economics, if not by law, the country faces overwhelming problems, including its moribund economy, rampant AIDS and endemic unemployment. But still, it managed “the changeover,” as South Africans refer to the end of apartheid, without the civil unrest that has wracked Zimbabwe and other parts of the continent. Now, for the first time, South Africans of all races are deciding what sort of country they will create.

“It’s like seeing the United States right after the Constitution,” Stakeman said. “Everything in South Africa is in flux.”

Besteman, who was to spend second semester in Cape Town this year, sees the political struggle of the 1980s replaced by an identity struggle. “It’s kind of edgy that way,” she said. “Nobody knows quite where they fit.”

Since 1999, students from the three Maine colleges have been folded into this swirling political and social mélangé. The Cape Town program differs from London and Quito CBB programs, all funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant, in that it was expressly designed to give CBB students exposure to all levels of South African society and to emphasize community service. Students take courses taught by CBB faculty, who rotate in and out of the program, and at the nearby University of Cape Town. Community service is tied to grassroots organizations rather than foreign NGOs, and students collaborate with, rather than oversee, those they assist.

“We didn’t want our students to in any way feel that they were saviors or messiahs going in to cure the problems of the little people of the world,” Stakeman said. “We wanted them to get the idea that they were just temporary laborers in the same vineyards.”

Vineyards are an apt metaphor in a region where wine is big business. But the vineyards to which Stakeman refers are the teeming townships of the Cape Flats, the area designated for nonwhites in the days of apartheid government.

In Cape Town, coloreds (the term for mixed-race South Africans) and blacks were forced to live in designated areas south and east of the city. The world has heard of Soweto, outside Johannesburg, where anti-apartheid riots broke out in the 1980s; it may be less familiar with Cape Town townships like Langa, Lavender Hill, Khayalitsha and Guguletu. Nor does the world see the “informal settlements,” the euphemism for the squatter communities that spring up in post-apartheid Cape Town wherever there is flat ground on which to erect a shack of tin or pallets.

“It blew my mind to see that,” said Jana Richardson, a Bowdoin junior. “I’m from Maine. That’s one of the reasons I came [to Cape Town]. You don’t have this kind of poverty in Maine. It’s very humbling. It makes you thankful for every single thing you have.”

In the townships, by comparison, residents don’t have much. The townships are the size of cities with the feel of shabby campgrounds. Khayalitsha, with its dirt lanes and small cinderblock houses, is home to an estimated 1.3-million people, all colored. Langa, the most established black township, is home to 70,000 people, many of them middle class. Langa has spazas, or
corner stores, an occasional restaurant. It is relatively safe, and in contrast to townships like Lavender Hill, where for a time last year CBB students could not do community service because gang wars made it dangerous for township students to stay after school.

Machine-gun-toting gangs, drugs, rape: those are the headlines that emanate from places like Lavender Hill. Yet CBB students have found this community and others to be warm and welcoming and doing good work.

At Zerilda Park, a drab box-shaped school surrounded by security fences, CBB students last year made the acquaintance of an inspiring community activist named Raymond Engelbrecht. Engelbrecht grew up in Lavender Hill, excelled in school and sports and made it out. He had forged a successful career in insurance but a few years ago came back to the community where he grew up. "I received a calling," Engelbrecht said. CBB students did, too.

They arrived at Zerilda Park intending to help out at a daycare center. But several CBB students, all musicians, brought their guitars and drums to the school one afternoon and were greeted by a standing-room-only audience that included some very talented youngsters. And the CBB students had an idea.

"We sent out a letter, it made the rounds," said Ben Griffin, now a Colby senior. The letter asked parents and friends back in the U.S. for donations. Ultimately enough money was raised to buy guitars, drums, amps—equipment for a jazz combo—and to hire a music teacher.

As of last fall, the music program at Zerilda Park was going strong, the jazz riffs wafting across the playgrounds after school. "It's just a matter of knowing how you can make a difference," Griffin said, "and the kind of difference you can make."

Last semester alone, Heim and other students in Webb's AIDS course made a poignant documentary on Beautiful Gate, a township hospice for babies born HIV-positive. Rachel Meiklejohn, a Colby junior, worked with a group of Langa high school students as they prepared for their matriculation exams, the test that would determine their future education paths and careers. "I think I've learned more from them than they've learned from me," Meiklejohn said.

Students of Julie McGee, a Bowdoin professor of art, last semester organized and promoted a first-ever art show in the township. It was called "Homecoming" and was devoted to the work of artists living in the townships. Students interviewed each artist, some through Khosa-speaking translators, and wrote their biographies in English. For students and McGee, it was an opportunity to shine a light on artists whose work has been long hidden in shadows of poverty.

"That's the great part about being here... people are so thankful just to have someone say, 'I believe in you. I'm interested. Tell me about your work,'" McGee said in her Cape Town office where paintings were stored prior to the exhibit. "Because there's not enough of that for black artists here."

Students entered artists' homes interested and often emerged inspired. These after all are painters and sculptors who produce art under the most difficult circumstances, sometimes choosing colors based on their cost, but refusing to consider art a luxury.

"They say that it's a gift they've been given and they must use it," said Colby's Heather Finn '03, who spent time with painter Alfred Budaza at his home studio in Philippi East. "It's almost spiritual."

Yet because few township residents can afford to buy art, the artists' works have been whisked away to white buyers in the city. One township native and artist, Vuyile Cameron Voyiya, now employed by the South African National Gallery, said the CBB effort—with buyers entering the townships from the white art world—gave the artists credibility in the eyes of their township
Living Color

When Leroy Gaines, an African-American student at Bowdoin, decided to spend a semester at the CBB Cape Town Center, he expected that he and black South Africans would have race as common ground.

Gaines, an Africana studies major from Holyoke, Mass., was mistaken.

"Coming from America and having this understanding of black people and global unity, I thought I would go there and we would be like, 'Hey, my brothers!' What happened is that we were not the same. You can't just assume that because you have the same color skin you have the same cultural traits."

That realization was one of many.

American students of color anticipate their Cape Town semester with excitement and some trepidation, wondering what it will be like to live in a society that was until a decade ago fundamentally and officially racist. They find themselves in a world where race still is precisely delineated and a primary defining characteristic.

Steve Jaboin, a Colby senior and a Haitian American, arrived in Cape Town last year and knew immediately that he was in a different world. "My host family asked me what I was," he said. "I was, like, 'What?' I thought, 'Wow.'"

Jaboin, who said he sometimes felt he had taken a time machine back to the 1950s, said the experience made him more fully realize how far America has come. In South Africa people to a large degree still are segregated by race in housing and economic and educational opportunities. Yet Jaboin and Gaines both felt an unexpected relief being in a country where race was frankly discussed and where blacks and coloreds, the label affixed to people of Malay and other descents, make up the vast majority.

"I figured race would be something that was on my mind all the time," Gaines said back at Bowdoin. "But being in South Africa, that was the first time I was in a community where black people were the majority. They were the politicians, the police officers. So in a way when I was there I felt my blackness wasn't so pronounced as it is here, particularly being in Maine. When I was there I was able to just walk around and not think about race all the time."

What both men felt was a respite from what they called the subtle racism of American society. Jaboin said he met some South Africans who were rude by American mores, but he still felt there was something refreshing about their honesty. In South Africa, he said, "race hasn't gone underground."

Like all CBB students, he lived with host families from different backgrounds and felt his identity change as he moved from world to world. Crossing the border to Namibia with a Haitian passport, he was confronted by border guards who had never heard of Haiti and were sure he was Kenyan. Living with a white host parent, he attended a church function in an affluent white suburb and introduced himself as the woman's son—and watched the eyebrows raise. "My identity was never the same two days in a row," Jaboin said.

Yet the openness with which South Africans confront race as they rebuild their society was refreshing, he said. "South Africa was honest," Jaboin said. "They haven't acquired the euphemisms of the 'isms.'"
Jaboin worked in the basketball program in Lavender Hill and felt both fulfilled and an imposter, he said. “I never volunteered before,” he admitted. “The program has made me think a lot about my relationship to the world.”

That, of course, is the idea, not only of CBB Cape Town but of a liberal arts education—to distort what had been your world view. To shake your foundations and make you reconsider your beliefs.

In CBB Cape Town there’s a whole lot of shaking going on. What is this place with a brutal past and a heroic leader? How can so many criminals and saints live side by side? With all of its problems, how can one of South Africa’s most distinguishing characteristics be optimism? Why don’t the impoverished masses rise up and smash the Ferrari dealership? How many township children have never been to the beach? Why are we so fortunate in this country? In the age of CNN and worldwide coverage, why don’t we know more about it?

“A lot of the students felt more confused at the end of the program than at the beginning,” Besteman said. “They came home with more questions to reflect on, more open-mindedness about confronting problems in their own country.”

**South Africa Diary**

Colby, Bates and Bowdoin students at the CBB Cape Town Center share their thoughts and experiences in an online journal. On November 16, Dana Kramer, Bowdoin ’03, posted this dispatch as she prepared to leave South Africa. The rest of Kramer’s entry, and others, can be found online at www.colby.edu/colby.mag/issues/win02/capetown/.

*But I can’t even imagine how going home to New York is going to feel. Unreal, uncomfortable, and it might take a while to regain equilibrium, re-adjust to the right side of the road, mother’s cooking (to which I must add, boorish), communicating only with Americans, returning to what might be a very different place than the America I left, where I’ll be surrounded by whatever patriotic zeal my countrypersons have recently come down with also, having to give brief accounts of my experience here over and over again, which I’ll be glad to share, but which I cannot imagine summing up well over one cup of coffee or to one of my parents’ friends in passing. It has been shocking and wonderful, and has affected me in ways I would not even know how to describe.*