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From the Editor's Desk

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From the Editor's Desk



There's something unseemly about the newest—and perhaps only—growth industry in the townships of South Africa. The industry is tourism. The tourists are westerners who are taken through the sprawling shantytowns in buses and vans. They peer through windows at the grim cement-block homes in the more established communities, at the teetering shacks in the more desperate squatter settlements. Most of the tourists are white; the people on the other side of the glass are black or “colored,” the South African designation for people of mixed race.

An odd sort of voyeurism? Not really. The fact is that the townships are sprinkled with entrepreneurs for whom tourism—vans and buses, tourists drinking beer in shebeens, schoolchildren singing for donations—brings hope. Tour operators figure that eight tourists create one job, at least according to township residents' modest expectations. Township residents also have come to see that it is in their interest to get the word out: apartheid may be over, but the poorest South Africans are still oppressed—by unemployment, AIDS and crime.

Most westerners have only vague knowledge of conditions in the townships. Like most impoverished places in the world, South Africa's townships are out of sight and out of mind.

But not to students and faculty at CBB Cape Town. They've worked in places like Langa and Guguletu, made close friends in Khayalitsha and Lavender Hill. The CBB funded a school music program, taught kids about the environment, did publicity for a hospice for children born with HIV, brought artists together for the first time. But the townships have done as much or more for the students from Colby, Bates and Bowdoin. They return with their world views irrevocably changed.

In a sense, the CBB Cape Town program (featured beginning on page 12) is an extreme form of what goes on at the three colleges every day. We are exposed to new information or a different perspective on something we thought we understood. And then our assumptions are rattled and shaken. Ideally, we come away with a new understanding. And that leads to another, and another and another.

Traveling to the other end of the earth to study is one way of doing it. CBB students will never look at their privileges in quite the same way, having seen so many people who have so few. They may never look at their own democracy in the same way, having watched democracy being designed in South Africa. They may find hope where it would have been invisible before.

Ideally, they come back to Colby, Bowdoin and Bates and spread the word. The process continues, spreading like a ripple on a pond. Because that's what these places do. Like the tour buses that rumble up and down the narrow township lanes, they force us to see, even when part of us would rather look away.

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