

Eyes Open in South Africa

by Jessica Weigel '01

Note: Jessica Weigel, a sophomore at Stanford University, sent this news from South Africa in September, 2006. She was there on a month-long Stanford seminar examining the country's situation a decade after apartheid. She attended classes at the University of Cape Town taught by a Stanford professor and by the Dean of Education from the University of Pretoria, among others. She also met with several political activists in the field of education, as well as Ebrahim Rasool, the premier of the Western Cape Province, whom Jessica and her classmates "actually made late for his meeting" with Vladimir Putin.

Jessica's time in South Africa took her into the field as well the lecture hall. Only a day or two into the seminar, she wrote . . .

On our second day, [Tuesday], we went to a high school in District 6, an area of forced relocations during apartheid. The high school is for black and colored (a mixed ethnicity of black and white) children. I spoke extensively with an eleventh-grader, Bonita. Some of the shocking things she told me were that her brother was killed in the township as part of gang violence, and that the police rape little girls frequently and other than that, do nothing. Thus she wants to go to the university and then become a police officer who actually does something positive. She also told me that the majority of her classmates and communities do "Tik" (their slang for the drug, meth) in the bathrooms of school, along with injecting heroin and snorting cocaine. These are the realities of a fairly "good" school and "safe" township. The amount of physical violence, and drug and alcohol abuse is ridiculous.

On Wednesday morning we met HIV/AIDS activists, including two HIV-positive people. A little background—the president of South Africa, Thamo Mbeki, is a "denialist," believing that the progression from HIV to AIDS is not causal and is instead linked to poverty.

We talked to many doctors who gave us a lot of information about the infection. We also talked with a human rights lawyer who explained the bill up for passage by Parliament. The bill would require that anyone who knows they have HIV or thinks they may

have it and then has sex, even consensual, with another person and transmits the disease, will be liable for criminal charges. On the surface this may look like a good policy, but this means that South Africa would actually be regulating sexuality, and these are human beings we're talking about! Also, by criminalizing HIV transmission, people are afraid to get tested.

There are so many better ways to help stop this epidemic. Right now, you can get condoms only at clinics with a face-to-face conversation with the nurse, who is usually a member of the person's community. This makes it extremely uncomfortable to ask for condoms and prevents many people from doing this. Schools do not provide condoms either.

After these meetings. We went to Ocean View, a community about 30 minutes outside of downtown

Stanford when East Palo Alto is just 10 minutes away. Any way you look at SA or the US, it truly boils down to an issue of economics and how we want to distribute/share the wealth of this world. If I become a human rights activist, what can I really do to effect lasting change? If I study economics, who will really listen to what should happen, instead of thinking selfishly and acting politically? So frustrating! I'm really glad I'm seeing and learning all these things, but the question remains — what can any of us as individuals do to make any sort of useful change? Not to sound cynical, but I don't think anyone has found an answer. But I will try with all that I have, as I guess that is all any of us has the power to do.



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Cape Town. Ocean View was created in 1966 as a “dumping ground” for colored people, who were forced (by the Group Areas Act) to move from Simmonstown, because it was deemed white. Ocean View is horrific. The sexual violence among the colored people is the highest of any ethnic group. Living in an area roughly the size of the St. Mark's campus [Jessica's secondary school], if that big, are 35,000 people. Most children drop out of school by third grade, because of the massive “Tik” problem, which we are told is being distributed by the police, among others. I saw a car with two wealthy white men drive by with four coloreds in the back, and one of our guides calmly told me that they were doing a drug deal.

We toured this area with people of the community, so we got to go inside some of the houses. Eight families will share one bathroom where children play and daily break the pipes, causing feces to spill all over. Over 50 percent of male adults aged 19–25 are unemployed because they don't have cars, there is no work near to them, and they don't have money for public transportation to get to the downtown area. Within this small area, there is one mosque, 84 churches, and —84 *shebeens* (bars). It is absolutely depressing.

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