

The Full South African Experience

"So you are American. You must be here on holiday?"

"No, actually, we are here to work."

This was a conversation that everyone on our team found themselves having at some point in our time in South Africa. In the midst of this conversation, I learned two very important things about Americans in South Africa. The first thing was that Americans rarely go to South Africa, let alone Black Americans. Black Americans making that "pilgrimage back to the motherland" more often found themselves in Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania or Egypt as compared to apartheid South Africa. I think we preferred to go somewhere where we "might have come from," like Western Africa. The second thing I learned in this short dialogue was that when Americans, White or Black, did go to South Africa it was to study at a university, or perhaps visit a relative. But we were not there studying, doing research or visiting any relatives. Our team was there to work. We were not tourists (in fact we never got the chance to sight-see), but we were there to get something we called "the full South African experience."

We were there against the worries and fears of our families and friends because we knew that apartheid was ending, democracy was coming, and there was something that we could do to help. We overlooked the fact that we could be killed at an intersection, in Soweto or Gugulethu, and travelled to South Africa thinking one thing, "We have to love the people we don't even know. Because, yes, we could die. But we would die working."

We were part of The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change's South Africa Non-Partisan Voter Education Project. There were five of us from Harvard College and one who had just completed Stanford Business School. We had spent several days in Atlanta being trained, then a few days in Johannesburg being trained some more. Despite all the training we incurred, when we were separated from each other and left dependent on our South African student counterparts and dispersed around the country, we still only knew one thing: we were going to find some Black and "colored" South Africans and teach them why and how to vote. The fact that I might not see another American for three or four weeks, the fears that my vegetarian stomach might have to take some meat out of hospitality, and realizing that I had to take a crash course in Northern Sotho on the ride to Pietersburg would have scared me if I had not been so excited about working. One of South Africa's many voter education programs had asked us for help and there we were ready to contribute our experiences. In the midst of all this excitement was hours of new information crammed into our minds and we were ready to empty these vessels and fill it with stories, friendships and many training sessions in return.

After one day in Pietersburg, it was obvious that I would not be doing much work there. I hid my disappointment by spending most or all of my time with the friends of my hosts, Kolanisi and Maggie. In fact my stay there was characterized by fear and estrangement that was a daily replica of my first day. I was introduced to several students, trying to look as though I understood everything being said, and making mental notes of everything that they did not tell us in our week of training.

"Mohlala! Mister Mohlala!"

Kolanisi called out across the field, while running.
"Mohlala!"

It was cool and dark and I barely saw the red and white jacket moving towards us.

"Mohlala," The call rang out again.

The red and white jacket replied in a whistle that sounded like a bird call. As if returning the call of a mate, Kolanisi whistled back. The two men met in the middle of the field and embraced one another. I was taken aback by the scene and just watched these two students. Kolanisi, my new friend and host, was of medium height, dark and quite lean. Everything he owned seemed to consist of rayon or silk. He always removed his cap when going under a doorway and never looked me in the eyes for the first couple days that we met. Mister Mohlala, on the other hand, was short, dark and had some kind of chemical curl in his hair. The red and white jacket indicated university loyalty with its crest across his heart, and underneath lay the slim body of a runner. They walked back to meet me, Kolanisi's arm around the shoulder of Mister Mohlala, with huge grins on their faces.

Maggie grabbed me by the wrist.

"Lerato," she said pushing me into full view of the stranger, "this is Lele. He is treasurer of the SRC."

"Lele, this is Lerato. She is here with us doing the voter education. She is from America." I held out my hand to shake his, and he grasped my right hand with both of his. He smiled and said, "My pleasure." Looking at Maggie, he said, "You named her 'Lerato'? Does she know that means 'love'?"

Kolanisi and Lele walked ahead, with Maggie and I a few steps behind. I had just arrived a couple hours ago when Maggie and Kolanisi took me from the professor's home, with whom I was staying and began to brief me on the weekend's activities. I had a voter education conference to prepare for, jet lag to overcome and a necessary adjustment to the language and was laying down for a long rest when they decided I should party South African style before all the work began. We had been walking around looking for music and people when I met Mister Mohlala.

We continued to walk on to the offices of the SRC, the student council. "Lerato, Kolanisi and I can not be with you all the time." My heart almost stopped. Maggie and Kolanisi had been my partners since orientation in Johannesburg. They were the only ones I knew and trusted. They were the only ones whose accent I could understand, which was becoming stronger and stronger the more they spent time with their friends. I was wholly dependent on them. I had no intention of leaving the side of either one of them.

"Lerato," replied Maggie, "Don't look so worried. Sometimes we will have class, but there are others, okay. Lele will take good care of you. This is his office over here." Lele smiled, and I felt somewhat safe in his hands.

"Ah, yes. Eee," I confirmed in Northern Sotho.

I must have looked as tired as I felt, because Kolanisi looked over at me, saying, "We must take Monica back. She is tired. It has been a long day. Then tomorrow we will make sure more permanent accommodation and security is in place. We can not let anything happen to our Monica. She is under our care." I felt warmer by his caring and protective guard over me.

I had been on campus less than twenty-four hours when Lele declared his love for me. I had taken a lunch break and

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Maggie and Kolanisi had gone to find some bread for me. They deposited me in Lele's office and promised to return soon.

Lele looked at me after I sat in the chair opposite his desk, "I love you." Before I had a chance to react, he said, "There have been other Americans here. Some writers from Tennessee, but it was different. They were not like you. I love you."

He had said it twice and I was sure that I had heard him correctly. Still in denial, I only said, "You do not know me. I just got here." My mind whizzed. No one prepped me for this. I tried to remain calm, and stayed to hear him out.

The conversation was very ambivalent. I mentioned the Lord's definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13, and he explained how his love for me covered everything in the chapter. He asked if I was married, or had any children. The negative answer seemed to imply that I was available. He asked me if I would ever marry a South African. Did I think I could secure a job in his country after elections?

I was rather intimidated by this loose proposal and it seemed as though his accent was growing even stronger. I focused my attention on his lips. They were black and moved inward and outward. It seemed to be the only way I could understand him. As the first half hour of our conversation passed, I decided to be silent, and I honed in on his lips. He licked them every couple of minutes before he began a new idea. He stopped once in the conversation to rub some chapstick over them, and he resumed his soliloquy. It was by watching his lips that I understood what Lele was saying to me. I did not need specifics if I could get the overall message.

As I stared at his lips, Lele gave me a piece of his dreams. He wanted to be a doctor. He would be one in five years. He would move to America and make money that would make him rich when he exchanged it into South African currency. He was supporting his family now but wanted someone to share all of his life and dreams with. Most of all, he wanted a partner in the struggle. The other Americans, they only cared about writing about the politics, but they would not get involved. They would not go into the townships or try to learn the language. They would not risk their lives for this cause, for his freedom. They came on holidays, he said. This, to him, was what separated me from the other Americans who came to the University of the North. He wanted someone who believed in Jesus and democracy. Looking at me more intensely, he had said that he wanted someone like me.

Did I think four weeks was enough time to fall in love with him? Would I promise to write him when I left? Maybe he would come visit me in America soon. After elections. Though I was startled by his assertiveness, I was stricken by the way Lele lived for the freedom struggle of Black South Africans. I knew that all the students I met cared more about the particulars of the new constitution than their academic discipline, but Lele was the first one to sit down and try to explain to me why. Essentially, he said with compassion, "I want a better life for my family, my parents and my children."

I decided it was time to find Maggie and Kolanisi. I asked Lele to point me in the direction of their offices. He looked at me, almost teary-eyed, "I know that you do not love me, but maybe before you leave, you will."

I replied, "Maybe." Quickly, I dodged the advance of a kiss and turned towards the door.

Everyone knew that he liked me. Every time Kolanisi and Maggie dropped me off at the professor's home, Kolanisi would tease me and say that Lele would be lonely now. They

quietly smiled a little larger when I would say in conversation, "Lele was saying to me that"

I only spent four or five days at The University of the North. A couple of status reports and the project decided that it was no longer safe for me to stay. When I called Atlanta and mentioned that I was being moved to a student dorm which incidentally had no hot water, no heat, bring-your-own-toilet paper and no gate or security, let alone doors to the entrance, I was told that I would be moved to Cape Town. Then someone told me that this university had the highest incident of rape, and moving sounded better and better. No one had briefed me about the fact that they half-expected me to serve tea and cook for the men. No one had briefed me about South African men falling in love with American women. And no one had mentioned anything about the lack of security.

Deep down I was glad to be moved to a larger city. There I would be working with another American student and teaching students in high schools voter education. I would finally be doing real work. But I was stuck with telling my new friends that I was leaving them. Rather heartlessly I did this and packed my bags to go to Cape Town.

We worked five or six days a week, more than 10 hours a day. Sometimes our work meant answering phones and reformulating programs for the voter education office. We attended numerous meetings of voter education projects, but the most fun was in going into a high school, struggling with the different accents and talking about voting.

Simply, we never told the students anything that a South African could not. We told them that we had voted and that there were Black mayors and school superintendents and congress people, but we knew that the greatest impact we had came in the fact that they would remember their voter education session as "the time two Americans came to talk to us about voting." We tried to leave with them the fact that we cared about their situation; the fact that we would vote there if we could; the fact that we had come to the country because we loved them. Somehow we loved them because they were Black and wanted to be free. To show them this, we taught a very simple song:

Freedom, oh freedom

Freedom over me

And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free

We taught this song to over 2000 high school students in the Western Cape. We told them to sing this song as they went to the voting stations to keep their hope intact. We told them to sing this song as they left the rooms excited and eager to share the logistics of democracy with their families. We told them to sing this song every time they were afraid to go vote.

Four weeks later, I sat in the Johannesburg airport. Exhausted and exhilarated, the program had ended and we had three days of debriefing and press conferences before heading back to the States. I ran to the South African coordinators and asked when the students from The University of the North were arriving. "When will we all be back together?" I asked.

Rather plainly I was told that there had been an accident. Some members of the SRC were driving from Bloemfontain to Pietersburg and something happened to the car. Kolanisi and Maggie were in Bloemfontain checking on their friends. I replied, "Oh, that's so unfortunate. So was anyone hurt?"

"Kolanisi and Maggie are fine. They were not there. Two are in critical condition and one died. The treasurer of the SRC."

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Simultaneously, he said and I sobbed "Lele."

I screamed as loud as I could and nothing came out. I fell into the closest chair and buried my head into my knees. My stomach felt queasy and the first things that flashed before my head was Lele's small body in the red and white jacket, lying somewhere, on the ground, lifeless. No advances, no bird calls, just lifeless.

No one tried to console me. Neither the American students nor the South Africans knew who Lele was or what he had meant to me. To them, he was just another funeral, like the three funerals in four days my friends had attended while I was with them.

At that time, I did not think that he was a martyr for the struggle. I did not think that he was Christian and that could comfort me somewhat. I did not think about how Maggie or Kolanisi might be feeling. I only knew that Lele was twenty years old and I never said goodbye. I never told him whether or not I had come to love him. Softly and without harmony, I tried to sing: Oh Freedom ... My partner joined in with me and there were four of us singing by the time we got to the last verse, There'll be justice, there'll be justice over me and before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my God and be free.

Under her breath and with little emotion, one South African replied, "Now you have learned some Sotho and some Xhosa. You have been to the cities, universities and townships. You have learned headwraps, cooked and taught the children. And now you have had a friend killed in politics. You have had the full South African experience."

Despite the fact that we went there to work, I find myself holding back tears when people asked what we did in South Africa. I reply, "We were there to work." We have had several presentations, press conferences and individual conversations regarding our time in South Africa since returning this August. I have fond memories of studying King's writings, the impact of nonviolence philosophy on teenagers, the song we taught and the song we learned. We each received at least a Zulu name and became personally involved in the daily reporting of violence in a township and progress with the new constitution. At times, though, I feel as though I am not telling the whole truth because the real trip is tainted with the memory of Lele, our conversation and his death. What was once work, became increasingly and painfully personal. After all, we were there to work, but more than anything else, I feel that we were there to see and feel what was happening, and to leave the students some of our love and bring home some of their pain.

Monica Coleman '95

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to return home or to stay in the States must be a personal one. Whether students directly from the Caribbean chose to pursue a career there more than students raised in America or vice-versa, doesn't really matter. However, what does matter is that we are all West Indian. In this respect there is an obligation that we as West Indians, regardless of where we choose to be, must carry out. That is simply to help other people. Whether West Indians, other black or Hispanic peoples or people in general, we as Caribbeans owe too much to those who came before us to neglect this duty. The one thing that the Ministers from those seven diverse and beautiful island nations so correctly realized was that the potential for incredibly miraculous and beneficial works contained in all of us, is unlimited.

Tim Codrington '95

POETRY CORNER

Mother

And if I were to ask you
Why you silently grit your teeth,
Sigh through your flared nostrils,
And languidly limp by,
The sun would peel
A parched smile
Across your weary face.

The unspoken answer
would fight
To demolish the restrictive
walls of my chest.
And if it did,
It would strike your
reassuring hand
from my head,
And emit a strained,
life-long ululation
from your throat.

Anonymous

IN RETROSPECT

When I said I hated you
I didn't understand
When I felt you shamed me
I still had much to learn
I simply had no insight
I fought you
Shunned you
Then I left you
But today I think I have grown
A little younger?
A little more perceptive?
I'm beginning to understand you see
Yes to realize
Who you are
What you are

Nothando Ndebele