

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, Brahmy Poologasingham, then an undergraduate at Brandeis University, spent eight weeks in South Africa as an intern with several organizations working on issues of human rights, poverty, and the environment. This narrative is her account of that experience - what she saw and heard, what she learned, what she gave.

Brahmy was one of the first group of Brandeis students to participate in the Ethics and Coexistence Student Fellowship program. Fellows begin the program by undertaking coursework in the area of intercommunal coexistence - studying the theory and practice of efforts around the world to bridge differences between historically -divided peoples. The students then spend the summer months working in community organizations in the U.S. and overseas, continuing their learning under the guidance of experienced practitioners. When they return to campus for the fall semester, they work individually with a faculty mentor to integrate their academic and practical understanding.

South Africa has proved a particularly rich and rewarding setting for the student fellows. As a nation that has made a dramatic transition from a particularly brutal form of tyranny to an inclusive constitutional democracy, the country teems with creative, active organizations addressing questions of human rights, history, and the continuing challenges of poverty, crime, and inequality. Brahmy's work allowed her to participate in this activism at both the national and the community levels.

The heart of Brahmy's experience was listening. In the township of eMbalenhle, she listened to parents explain how the smoke from coal stoves stung the eyes and choked the lungs of the community's children. Outside of Pretoria, she listened to women describe experiences of violence at the hands of men. In the formal setting of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she listened to men and women recount tales of torture and suffering under the apartheid regime.

Careful listening meant that Brahmy learned a great deal - about modern South Africa, about the human condition, and about herself. She integrated that listening into the academic work that she did when she returned to Brandeis, and her experiences have informed her plans to work in the field of law and human rights. Her listening allowed her to learn and take a great deal from the wise and courageous people she met in South Africa.

Through listening Brahmy gave a great deal as well. On a practical level, the information she collected was part of an ongoing process to respond directly to the needs and concerns of people in the townships. Her warmth and sympathy allowed her to form fast friendships in a short time. Yet she also played her part in a larger historical process as well: the process of recovering and publicizing the truth, of acknowledging suffering, and of seeking a better future through candid confrontation with the past. She has laid a strong foundation for a lifetime of commitment to seeking truth and justice.

Daniel Terris
September, 2000

South Africa: A life Experience in Hope, Peace, and Reconciliation Aimed Towards Rebuilding a Nation.

Arriving in South Africa

The first thing I remember about South Africa, as I left the Johannesburg airport heading towards Pretoria, was the sight of blazing orange fires that would die out just as quickly as they started. The air and the land smelt of dry smoke, and I could feel that the earth was parched due to the lack of rain during those winter months. There was a demi-moon whose light filtered down to illuminate the terrain, and though there was no vegetation on the ground, I could still see a colorful, deep, red, clay, which covered the earth. It was a wonderful collage of bright hues of red and orange that welcomed me that night and made me feel both apprehensive and excited all at once.

Being in a new country, continent and culture and realizing that I knew no one in this environment was something that I had not thought about seriously till my drive to Pretoria. Thus, in addition to the excitement of facing a new challenge, I also felt very lonely and insecure about my surroundings. I have done a lot of traveling and relocating during my life, but this was the first time that I had ventured out on my own, without any family or friends nearby to bail me out if something were to go wrong. Everyone I loved and cared for, were a continent or an ocean away, and at best I could only e-mail or call them. It was an overwhelming feeling to realize that there was no one from my past here with me in South Africa to give me the physical comforts and securities, that I took for granted at Brandeis or at home, like a hug or a reassuring face to face conversation. I think that many of my anxieties on this road trip to Pretoria hit me all of a sudden because the actuality of being in South Africa was something that had finally sunk in. It

was no longer a dream in the distant future, nor something I was talking about in abstract terms with my college mates and professors, for it was now a reality!

When I woke up the next morning in my new home in Pretoria, I crawled out of bed and was surprised to see rays of bright sunshine streaming through the windows and the curtains, trying to seep into every nook and cranny of my living quarters. It would be one of many times that the weather in South Africa would catch me by surprise, for though it looked deceptively warm and summery outside, it was actually quite chilly and cold. This was nothing unusual for the wintry month of June, but somehow in the two days that I had been in the country, I had already come down with the flu. As a result, the cold temperature only served to heighten my condition (especially since many houses, even the most modern ones, did not have central heating). Trying to disregard my puffy eyes and sore throat, I managed to bask in the beautiful sunshine that morning, for it lifted my spirits and gave me an energy that made me feel I could go anywhere and do anything. As I was getting dressed to go to my first internship assignment with NIPILAR(National Institute for Public Interest Law & Research), I glanced at a quote I had jotted down by Nelson Mandela that read, “The brave man is not he who does feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” In my journal, later that night, I wrote that reading that quote made me realize how much I want to conquer the world and understand its many conflicts. I said that the only way I knew how to do this was by embracing my present dwellings, by living in it and learning about it, by facing my demons, like my insecurities, prejudices and loneliness, and finally by never giving up hope in the face of adversity. In the end, it came down to the fact that I had chosen to

come here of my own free will, and I was determined to understand and take part in the coexistence efforts that were taking place in the post-Apartheid South Africa.

In the spirit of trying to remember all the challenges and experiences of my trip I kept a daily journal in which I recorded as much as I could. Using words (and some sketches), I tried to document my life by writing in detail about my internships and my personal life, so that the details of my visit were not lost with the passage of time. Since my journal entries are my own private records, I wanted to put together something that others could read to get an idea of what this particular Ethics Center Fellow went through during the summer of 1998—an exciting time to be a coexistence worker in South Africa. This paper strives to recreate and narrate many of the crucial aspects of my living and working experiences in South Africa as I grappled with the definitions of such terms as peace, reconciliation and coexistence.

Who Am I

To the question, “Who Am I,” I cannot simply answer “I am Brahmy Poologasingham.” So, before I begin to recount my fellowship experiences, I would like to briefly introduce the reader to the person who will be narrating the following paper. Born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and having lived in many different countries, because of my father’s occupation as a diplomat, I became aware of the numerous human rights and other conflicts both within my own nation’s boundaries as well as worldwide. In my native Sri Lanka being part of the Tamil minority and being a female in a male-dominated society is not an easy task. I lived in Sri Lanka for four years and during the time I resided abroad, I traveled there every summer for three months to visit my extended family. I may have been raised internationally, and attended University in the

United States, but I have always been a child of Sri Lanka first. I am constantly involved and aware of the country's heartbeat, its everyday routine, the mix of cultures and religions (manifested through the many different family friends and acquaintances), and of course I have always been keenly aware of the political situation. Over the years, I watched, from the inside and outside of the nation, and witnessed the civil and political problems that divided my country's people, leaving behind only strife and bloodshed. Unfortunately, these problems have only escalated as the situation in Sri Lanka has gotten worse. So this was how I matured-struggling to understand the complexities of my own fighting society, while comparing and looking at other nations' conflicts for solutions. Thus, South Africa had been in my focus for a very long time because there are many similarities and connections between both the Sri Lankan and South African context. At the end of the day, I hoped to learn something in South Africa that would help me better understand the concept of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Before leaving for this fellowship, there was one thing I was absolutely sure of about myself, and that involved how I felt about human rights. Human rights is one of the oldest and most basic concepts to this twenty year old, and I grew up knowing its value and never taking this truly precious right for granted.

Working for NIPILAR- The National Institute for Public Interest Law and Research

The first couple of days I spent in Pretoria were consumed with interviews with various departments of the Non Governmental Organization known as NIPILAR. The group was established in 1986 to provide legal assistance to individuals and communities

adversely affected by apartheid laws, policies, and practices. It was decided by my supervisor, Advocate Mohamed Shafie Ameermia, that I should take on two projects while I was to intern with NIPILAR. Both projects would be consistent with my interests in the local community and the legal field in the context of grass roots coexistence work.

My first project involved working with CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). NIPILAR was one of the founding members of the CEDAW group in South Africa, and its main goal was to raise awareness and understanding of gender equality both in the government (through the law) and in civil society. Following the fourth U.N. World conference on Women, held in Beijing in August-September 1995, the CEDAW group established a concrete program under NIPILAR called, "Bringing Beijing Home." I came to understand this program as one that strived to foster attitudes and develop laws, policies and concrete programs that support the end of discrimination against women and girls in South Africa in order to advance gender equality.

CEDAW GROUP PROJECT

During the month of June I worked with the CEDAW group as an assistant in their community law center and was trained to answer many basic questions about their rights, as well as direct women in dire circumstances to the appropriate counsel or lawyers. There were several women who came to the community center because they had simple questions about the law and their rights under this new democratic legal system. Unfortunately, the majority of women who came to the center were abused or discriminated against and wanted advice about any actions they could take to remedy their situations. I was appalled by the rates for domestic violence and rape! A popular

statistic that was commonly thrown around in our office claimed that every minute a female between the ages of eight months and eighty years is raped in S.Africa. Though I don't have any further numbers or statistics on sexual violence, I found that it was general knowledge that this type of violence is particularly common in the country, and unfortunately those that report such incidents are very few.

Many times I took statements from these women so that the lawyers could look at the facts objectively in order to assess the validity of the many incoming complaints of discrimination. I did not meet with any rape victims because they had trained personnel for those victims, and thus I dealt with the more milder domestic violence victims. Part of the grassroots element of working at the community center also involved going out into the townships and areas around Pretoria and Johannesburg and attending town meetings and visiting individuals in their homes. This allowed the CEDAW group to reach more of the masses, many of whom were illiterate, in order to hand out pamphlets (which were filled with illustrations and written in all the main languages of the country), and explain the rights which women and girls are entitled to. We also took the time to tell people how and where they could go if they had any questions. This is extremely important, for traveling to the community center, which is far away from some of the groups NIPILAR reaches out to, can be difficult and expensive for the poor. As a result, women are easily discouraged by these factors and their problems could be overlooked because their voices and stories are just not heard.

My favorite part of this first project was, without a doubt, the visiting of communities, many times with translators. As a women's rights group, the program targeted first and foremost, educating and raising the consciousness of females (old and

young), many of whom take on domestic roles and are found primarily at home. I myself was frightened by the culture of violence that seemed prevalent in many S.African homes and on the streets. Sexual violence was something I was constantly aware of, and since my work involved mostly educating and informing others, I did gain a little peace of mind because I was so aware of my environment. Thus, most of our visits involved going to individual houses as well as group meetings within these communities. This is not to say that we did not address males who were interested in being involved, but most of the group's attention was geared towards a female audience. This first project was the ideal internship experience, for not only was I trained to explain basic women's rights in these various communities, but I also got my first glimpse of how the majority of poor South Africans lived. We visited many townships, some of which were better off than others, but most of which were well below the subsistence level set up by the state. I remember and later wrote in my journal that I was overwhelmed when I visited my first township, right outside of Pretoria. It wasn't quite as bad as many others that I would come to visit in the months ahead, but it was a stark contrast to the bustling, Westernized city of Pretoria, where tall and modern buildings and spacious parks and recreational spots are abundant. I had seen many pictures of townships before coming to South Africa, but nothing prepared me for the actual sight. The small tin houses, known as shacks, where as many as five people lived, were crammed quarters, which usually contained a bed or two, a small stove, a television, and if room permitted, a cabinet, table or some other small pieces of furniture. In townships where people were luckier, they had more space, including a bit of land to garden in. These places also had running water (which the government had successfully distributed straight to the houses, in a few areas), and

the garbage, pollution and congestion problems were not as prevalent and dangerous to one's well being. But even in these "better" townships, the poverty and overall situation could not be defined as an improvement because there was still so much that needed to be accomplished to make all of these areas, at the very least healthy and safe.

Visiting these shacks with the CEDAW group made me very ashamed of the things I take for granted, for my room at Brandeis was much bigger than many of these homes in which people dwelled. It is truly a humbling experience when you realize how little, in the form of material assets, that so many South African families have, and yet, I never, during my multiple visits to so many communities, heard anyone complain about their lack of possessions. They may have had a thing or two to say about Apartheid, about the difficulty of finding a job and making a few extra rands, or about politics and the government; however, everyone seemed to embody the hope that their living and economic situations would gradually get better under the new Madiba (Mandela) rule.

Working with the CEDAW project towards the larger goal of equity and justice for women by helping out at the community center and also visiting the communities themselves, was both an educational and eye opening experience. I truly feel that the CEDAW group does an immense amount of work at the grass roots level, and with the help of other governmental and non-governmental groups. As a whole these groups are working on coexistence by trying to change traditional roles of women and men in a post Apartheid South African society to eradicate all forms of racial discrimination, colonialism, and international aggression to create a new economic order based on equity and justice.

The second project

During my internship with NIPILAR I was very lucky for I got to work closely with Attorney Shaffie Ameermia, whom I assisted two days a week, and sometimes on the weekends. He dealt mostly with public policy and constitutional law issues, as well as representing a few human rights cases. My responsibilities involved interviewing the victims he represented and taking notes and statements from them.

As I gained more experience from working with Mr. Ammermia on some of his more important cases, he began to take me to the superior court in Pretoria whenever he could. It gave me a good opportunity to see how the courts system operated, and to witness the changes that were taking place in the legal system. After all, even though apartheid was over and a lot of new legislation had been passed, there were many aspects of the court system that were still in transition. The area that I came to respect and learn the most about was the South African constitution, as Mr. Ameermia had me researching for two of his main cases that dealt with issues in this area of the law. I discovered a new respect for South Africa and the creators of this nation's Constitution, for it is a truly beautiful document that embodies the ideals of a country that strives for equality and justice in the twenty first century. It does this both by acknowledging and seeking to correct South Africa's past as well as taking into consideration the histories and wrongdoings of humanity over the decades. I read a lot of literature about the process involved in drafting South Africa's constitution-the debates over language, the papers written on what rights should and shouldn't be articulated, the documents that analyzed the methodical, scrutinizing manner in which experts looked at charters, declarations, and at other countries' constitutions, and much more.

In the end I felt I had gotten a larger picture of the issues that were important to different groups, and how crucial it was to both the drafters of this document and the people of this country that no one's rights be excluded. In light of the atrocities of Apartheid, it is understandable how much value the South African Constitution embodies, in its efforts to acknowledge the past and secure the future. I learned that one cannot even think of the future peaceful coexistence of different groups in South African without having put into place a sound Constitution and a strong and fair legal system.

Living in Pretoria

My living arrangements, which I have mentioned above briefly, involved staying with a young woman named Catherine in her two-bedroom apartment. Since she had a shiny, but old red Honda civic she would give me a ride to work everyday and drop me at the corner of Pretoria square from where I would walk two blocks to get to the NIPILAR office. Catherine felt it would be safer for me not to use the public transportation system because I was unfamiliar with the area. She also felt, and was probably right, that despite my South Asian ethnicity (which allowed me to look like a South African native), people would pick up on the fact that I was a foreigner if I were ever to open my mouth and ask a question with my American accent. I remember those first few days of work when Catherine dropped me off at 7:30 in the morning. I felt quite afraid walking through the square and down the streets as the vendors, shopkeepers and many loiterers would stare at me. But after the first week, I became very familiar with my surroundings and with the confidence of knowing where I was going, I was able to enjoy the ten minute walk to the office. What I took pleasure in the most, over time, was the fact that I came to know

some of the food vendors who were there every day, as I began to buy groceries as well as other domestic items at the end of my workday. I loved the small town atmosphere in this big city, and I know it was largely due to the friendly nature of the people in the office and out on the bustling streets.

Living with Catherine was a blessing because I felt that I learned so much from her, and was exposed to Pretoria and the nearby surroundings due to her willingness to answer all my questions as well as to take me anywhere I wanted. Catherine is a Caucasian female, of British ancestry (as opposed to being Afrikaans, who are of Dutch ancestry) and yet she had many friends who were Black, Indian and Colored. Because she was only a few years older than I was, she introduced me to a lot of recent college graduates who had been a part of the apartheid struggle, much like herself, through their university activities. I spent many weekends with these young people, going to museums, historical sites, on day trips to visit such tribes as the artistically talented Ndebele women, to flea markets (which are found in abundance and very popular all over South Africa), attending bryes (barbeques), going out to eat, and much more. What I really enjoyed during these times was the debating and discussing of issues about South Africa, which was an excellent way to better understand many topics. I learned about the Apartheid movement from the students' perspective, and all about the activism that took place on their University of Durban campus (UDW). Catherine had told me that the government had let a small number of Coloreds and Indians enroll in the University in order to pit these groups against the Blacks and cause animosity amongst the groups. But instead of falling for the government's tactics many students joined the Apartheid movements which included Whites, Coloreds and Indians. A large number of them

joined the Black youth in their anti-Apartheid campaign efforts under the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). In the late 1970's students became even more vocal under the South Africa Students Organization (SASO) under the leadership of Steve Biko, and Catherine and her friends had many stories about the strikes, rallies and other protests they had been involved in under SASO's orders. During this first month in Pretoria, I also learned a lot about South African politics, the different parties (and some surviving tribes) and what they stood for, important issues that this next generation faced, and the varied perspectives that came from being part of a unified South Africa that consisted of different social, economic and racial groups. I wish I could narrate all the stories conversations, and engaging debates that I have written about in my daily journal entries, but as this would take too long, I will say that the open minded attitude and willingness to share, on Catherine and her friends' part, really helped me to better understand the climate of the nation during both the past and post apartheid period.

I think that the mood overall in South Africa during this winter of 1998 could be described as one that was hopeful, and people looked to the future with the promise of a better life for everyone. My work with NIPILAR and my social life in Pretoria introduced me to a lot of what would be considered South Africa's emerging middle class; however, it wasn't till I worked with NOVA and Attie Van Niekirk, that I interacted with the poor and severely economically disadvantaged population of Black South Africans.

NOVA

During the month that I worked with NIPILAR I kept in constant touch with the Ethics Center Fellow, Attie Van Niekirk who headed an NGO called NOVA, which is based in Pretoria. I was planning on working with Attie on a project in the rural province of Mpumalanga in a town called eMbalenhle for three weeks, right after I was done with my month long internship at NIPILAR.

Even though I was given a lot of reading material and briefed on what I would be doing in the township of eMbalenhle, I was a little unsure of the work I had been assigned and my job responsibilities. It wasn't until my first weekend trip out to inspect the area, that I came to understand the nature of the project and its goals. NOVA is an organization that seeks to implement development projects on a grass roots level to better the immediate and long term living conditions of the masses. They concentrate their projects mostly in the upper northeast provinces of South Africa like Gauteng and Mpumalanga.

As I was arriving into eMbalenhle for the first time, I was mesmerized by the beautiful colors of the late evening: a deep orange from the setting sun overtook the sky and it was soon replaced by a misty, pink that seemed to drip from the heavens into the horizon. I commented to the volunteer who had driven me in about what a beautiful sight it was, and he told me, much to my dismay, that the main reason why the sky was hazy and turned those particular colors was because of the immense pollution in this area. I discovered that the smoke produced from the township had overtime polluted eMbalenhle and the surrounding areas, which was causing massive health and environmental problems.

When we finally arrived in the township it was getting dark, but I could clearly see the shacks lining the streets, each one closely nestled to the next. There was garbage strewn all over the ground, the ditches were filled with dirty stagnant water, and there were domesticated goats and some hens running loose on the side of the roads. Due to my experiences living and having witnessed the poverty that is prevalent in other third world and developing countries, including my hometown Sri Lanka, I wasn't shocked at the sight of poverty, as much as I was sad and heartbroken by it.

The only other experience with a township that I had had thus far, was a day visit to Soweto with a bus full of tourists. It was an interesting excursion in which we were taken to all the historical houses and sites that had been significant to the apartheid struggle, after which we strolled through the shanty town taking pictures and slapping high fives with the local kids. We ended the trip by going to a local shabeen (small shack turned into a bar) and having some Castle beer. I wrote in my journal that I felt oddly safe with the group of tourists as we would never have been able to visit the Sowetan townships on our own, and yet I had felt like I was disrespecting and invading these people's space. I did not like the fact that their poverty and living circumstances had been reduced to a show for tourists who wanted to see an example of a "shack" or a "shanty town." What made the whole situation so problematic for me was the internal conflict and the feeling that I had lost a bit of self-worth by playing this role of the eager tourist over the role of the student who was there to learn.

Being in eMbalenhle gave me the opportunity to work on a hands on project where I wasn't just someone passing through, only to take a snapshot in order to document the poverty and economic hardship of the township. It gave me a chance to

contribute my skills and time towards a worthy project that strived to ameliorate the township's living conditions and bring about coexistence through social and environmental change. The NOVA project that I worked on had started a few years prior to my arrival and a lot of research and analysis had already been done, so they were now in the implementation phase. Essentially many townships like eMbalenhle, which consists of approximately two hundred thousand inhabitants, live in small corrugated tin shacks, and produce a lot of smoke, that comes out of the coal stoves they use for cooking, heat and light. Because the shacks have no electricity, due to the government's financial inability to provide this utility to the masses, coal stoves are used widely both in the morning and extensively during the night (especially in the chilly winter months of May through August). The coal stoves also serve a societal function because they provide light and warmth around which families and communities gather to communicate and socialize. The last dilemma involved the coal merchants who sell the product and make quite a large profit, and thus would definitely feel threatened by the NOVA project.

The problem with coal that is used in most of these stoves is that it is highly toxic and emits carcinogens that pollute the air and cause many health problems such as asthma, lung disease and emphysema. This was evident in the studies that were done in eMbalenhle that showed how the older and especially the younger population had chronic health problems that were directly linked to the polluted air. Thus, in order to improve this situation NOVA launched a project that involved testing the air to see how much pollution was actually being transmitted, and then redesigning household technologies in the community in order to reduce this pollution.

I was lucky enough to take part in both of these mini projects for three weeks during which time I would spend the week in the township working on the project, and I would go back to Pretoria during the weekend. A team of NOVA workers and I went out the first week and spoke, using translators, to about fifty families who were willing to take part in the air tests that we had to run in the families' homes. The process involved dropping off a calibrator that was designed like the human lung to breath air in and out. These calibrators had a filter like a human lung's sacs that when taken apart showed us approximately how much of the pollution was being retained in the body. We would drop off these calibrators at 6:00 a.m., tell the families to make sure they were not moved or touched, and picked them up later that night or the following day. What really stunned me was the amount of dirt that we found in the filters when we took them apart-in just one day there were a substantial amount of pollutants and one can only imagine the kind of damage that occurs to a person's, let alone a child's, health over weeks, months, and years!

Even though I was still helping to collect data from the calibrators, as it was a continuous process, I also started working with a different group on redesigning homes, to try and reduce the transmission of pollutants emitted by the coal. This involved a number of community meetings and talks with the local township representatives and inhabitants, in order to get their input as to what would be the best way to explain and implement this phase of the project. We used the same fifty families, dividing them into five test groups, and asked them to try four different methods that were aimed at reducing the amount of coal being consumed in their homes. The methods involved, repairing old stoves and their chimneys, replacing old stoves, insulating the tin shacks to keep them

warmer, using a substitute coal that was better for the environment, and lastly there was a control group which went about it's daily activities as usual.

In trying to implement these methods, many materials were needed (for example, new stoves, stove parts, insulation etc...) and under the direction of the head fieldworkers we found ourselves doing many hands on projects. I found myself traveling to Jo'Burg at least twice during the week with co-workers in order to purchase the materials for the project, and I would also work on helping out at the site for at least half the day. I felt like I was well aware of everything that was going on because I worked on numerous aspects of the project, from the quantitative collecting of data to the qualitative assessment of the project.

There were days when we would wake up at five a.m. in order to be in the township early in the morning to collect data from the calibrators, and then by the time we were done with implementing some of the methods in the houses, we would not come home till ten p.m. I remember coming back to the lodgings where all the white and out of town fieldworkers stayed, and everyone was inevitably tired, cold and smelled like smog. In my past experiences the only time your clothes wreaked of smoke was when you got back from a club, and even then you could always leave to go home-the people in this township didn't have that option because this was where they lived. I knew I was very lucky that I didn't have to live in a shack and that at the end of the day, I returned to a secure, warm inn where running water and electricity were abundant.

On one particular occasion I stayed in one of the families' shacks all day observing them for the project, and I could not stop rubbing my arms and feet because it was freezing cold in their small home, despite the heat from their stove. There were two

young children that were about two and five and their noses were constantly running, and I thought that they perhaps had the flu or colds. When I asked their mother, Busi, about it, she responded that this was how they always were because everyone's noses around here were always stuffy, and it's just that the adults knew how to blow their noses. I had spent from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. in this tiny shack and though it got progressively warmer when the sun came out at 9 a.m. it went back to being freezing cold again at 5 p.m. When I asked Busi if she ever felt the cold in the house, she said she did, but that she had gotten used to it. Her main concern was for her children who she bundled up in numerous layers. Ever since that day I constantly thought about how much I'd taken things for granted (and still do), when there were thousands of people who had never had such amenities as electricity, indoor toilets, running water, a roof over their heads, or clean air to breathe—these were luxuries in their world.

Over the next few weeks I visited the family often, and spoke to Busi about her hardships supporting her family with her husband working all day and on the weekends, especially because of his low pay. She like many others tried to make ends meet by growing a vegetable garden in her backyard and trying to do odd jobs to earn a little extra money on the side. Unfortunately her children were still so young that she couldn't venture out beyond the township to find work because they needed constant care and attention. Busi's problem is not unique for there were many women who found themselves in exactly the same situation, if not worse. I really came to love Busi because she represented true South African hospitality, for there was never a day when I visited her, that she would not force me to sit down in her small, but meticulously clean shack/house, to drink tea and have biscuits. I knew she was poor, but it wasn't until one

of the fieldworkers pointed it out that I realized that even the sugar she offered me was a huge luxury, and that I should be honored that she was so giving. Before I left the township, I went to a store and made sure to buy thick sweaters, blankets and some pots and pans for Busi and her children, who I had come to adore. Perhaps it was a selfish gesture to ease my guilt about the unjust world we live in; however, the family gave me such huge smiles and hugs when I delivered the gifts that I knew at that moment I was not just a fieldworker doling out charity, but a friend presenting parting gifts.

When I left eMbalenhle at the start of August it was at the end of one of the project's phases and NOVA was planning on monitoring the houses through August to see which of the housing design methods were useful and effective. They were then planning on starting the next phase of the project in September and applying the methods they had found to be most effective to more houses. In this manner they hoped to reduce the carcinogens released into the air over time and educate the populace about the dangers of burning too much coal.

As a result of working with NOVA, I learned a lot about grass roots organization and implementation as a means to development and coexistence. I realized that one cannot speak of coexistence and exclude social development, because if you make this mistake you are just an idealist throwing around a fancy term. In coexistence work in South Africa one must not ignore the realities, but instead realize that there is a pressing need for food, shelter, education, and jobs. By swiftly working towards providing these things the country can solve many problems that currently hinder different groups from coexisting peacefully. I do think the South African government and various NGO's

within the nation are doing what they can in these areas of development, but it will take a while before any significant changes are accomplished.

Looking back, I felt that I really came to know the community that I worked in, and the families that were part of this project were always so positive and welcomed us into their homes with open arms. Even though I couldn't speak siZulu, the predominant language in this area, I was able to communicate with people who spoke broken English, but mostly through translators as well as using my hands. In no time, I became close to some of the local fieldworkers, and I would visit various people in the community (like Busi) with them around tea time. This was my opportunity to learn more about peoples' personal lives, their thoughts and ideas, feelings about the government and the social situation. I always found that they gladly spoke about these issues, and shared stories about Apartheid and what it was like during this time of oppression. During my last days in eMbalenhle, I really felt a deep sense of regret that I could not work on the project for a longer period of time, for I had established some close bonds with a number of women and some of the youth in the township. I will never forget the generosity that was extended to us by many individuals and families in this township, and despite their poverty they were more friendly and giving than some of the most affluent and well to do people I have met in my lifetime.

The Human Rights Commission (HRC)

Though I was sad to leave Embalenle and the NOVA project, I was extremely excited for my last internship in South Africa because I was able to secure a position with the Human Rights Commission in Jo'Burg. I was to live with Mrs. Sheila Mabusela and

her family in Soweto and since Mrs. Mabusela was the co-chairperson of the HRC I would be able to drive in with her to work everyday.

The night before Catherine drove me into Jo'Burg, I wrote in my journal how I was full of queries about what it would be like to live in Soweto, what my living conditions would be like, and if I would fit into this new environment. Thus far, I had lived with Catherine and when working with NOVA I lived in a single room in an inn with the Afrikaaner fieldworkers from Pretoria, like Attie. Of course there were a number of blacks and whites on the project, but the black fieldworkers essentially lived in eMbalenhle. This would be my first time living with a black family and I wondered if the experience would be different, and if so would it be a positive one? There were a million and one questions running through my head and there was nothing I could do to keep the butterflies in my stomach from flying around.

Catherine drove me straight to the HRC office in Jo'Burg where I met Mrs. Mabusela. She was a short, round woman with a big smile, and I still recall the bright yellow batik dress she was wearing when I met her on that sunny but chilly day. I knew from the moment that I saw her that she was a motherly figure, and when I extended my hand to shake hers she said in a very friendly manner, "Here we are not so formal with the people we work with, and plus you are going to be family for a while." Following this comment, she gave me a hearty laugh, and a hug and a light peck on the cheek, and I felt right at home because it was apparent that she was a jovial, easy-going, and affable woman. After this exchange, Mrs. Mabusela took me around the office and introduced me to everyone, giving me a short synopsis of the different projects that were under way at the HRC. She proceeded to tell me that I would be working closely under

her supervision reviewing and screening Human Rights complaints that came in from all over the country. This process involved a lot of reading and research, writing letters back to victims and advising them on their specific situations as to what recompensation or actions they could take. Once I had worked there for a while, I came to take on such responsibilities like speaking to victims over the phone or when they came in, going to Commission hearings and meetings to learn more about human rights in South Africa, race relations, dismantling Apartheid policies, which are still socially in place, empowering the police force, reforming the prison system, and other such subjects. I learned and processed so much information from taking notes and actively participating during these meetings, and as a result I felt more comfortable, despite being a foreigner, discussing and debating about various topics. I think the most valuable lesson I learned when working with the HRC, was that it was acceptable for me to have my own opinions as a visitor, but what was crucial was to really listen to what South Africans were saying, in order to get a sense of the whole picture. I came to see that a narrow mind is only wasted for it is not tested, challenged or questioned-all of which can be accomplished from listening to those around you.

The office was not the only place of growth during my stay in Jo'Burg, as Mrs. Mabusela's home and family turned out to be one of my most amazing, nurturing living experiences in South Africa. I should have known that such a dynamic woman also had an equally vibrant family. Sheila (or Mrs. M. as I called her at the house), lived in a bright red brick house in Orlando West with her three daughters, Linda, twenty, Charity, sixteen, Kariso, twelve and her husband and their little dog, Zenami. They also had an older son who was married and lived in Kwazulu Natal and the youngest daughter Kariso

was at a summer camp during my stay with the Mabuselas. I got along very well with Linda as we were the same age and she often took me to her social 'hang out' spots after I got back from work and she had gotten back from school (Technical college). We hit it off right away as we were sharing a room, and the very first night I was at the house she took me out and introduced me to all her friends. I felt very comfortable with this group of peers, which consisted of six males and two of her female cousins (Fundi and Lulu). Though at first I was very aware of my race and accent, that soon faded away when I realized that Linda and her friends were not the least bit judgemental nor exclusionary. They were so sincere and accepting of me, and they took me everywhere they went that I really came to know certain areas in Soweto and Jo'Burg quite well. This was a nice change from my earlier experience as the tourist who was in and out of Soweto in a day. Of course, I would never have been able to walk around alone, even during the day, as Soweto (and even Jo'Burg) is considered quite dangerous for people who are not from the area. Of course for people who know each other and live in this area, there is no real sense of threat because there exists a tight community in which people look out for one other.

The Mabusela's living situation is such that they inhabit a house on a residential street, right around the corner from which there are countless small tin shacks that line the horizon until your eyes can't distinguish the sky anymore. Even though the Mabusela's are better off due to the fact that both husband and wife hold well paying jobs, and could afford to move to another area, they still chose not to move away from where their roots are. Mr. Mabusela would always have dinner discussion sessions with me, and one time, he told me that many people were immensely proud to be from Soweto

because it was of great significance during the Apartheid struggle. Revered figures like Walter Sisulu, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and historical sites like the Hector Peterson Memorial, the Madiba Museum, and other buildings were only walking distance away from us. Mr. Mabusela took Linda and me out one Sunday after we had all gone to the local Catholic church for mass, and gave me a walking tour of the important parts of Soweto, after which he took pictures of us in front of every significant house and building. At the end of my stay he labeled the pictures with detailed historical notes so I would not forget about my stay in Soweto, and now when my memory fails me, I am thankful for his thoughtfulness.

Working for the HRC I gained a personal knowledge about how victims felt, pre and post apartheid. Living with the Mabusela's I gained an understanding of how black Africans lived on a daily basis, from the poor to those who were better off. At work I had contact with a community of Human Rights activists from lawyers, educators, fieldworkers to students, whereas the sense of community I got at the Mabusela's house came from their family, friends and my volunteering experiences. I spent many hours with Linda during the weekend volunteering for the Township Aids Project, which strived to teach households as well as elementary to high school kids about sex, protection and HIV/AIDS. Very soon the youth and the parents whom I interacted with through TAP, would recognize me and stop to chat with on the streets of Soweto, when I caught the mini-bus into town, or when I went grocery shopping with Linda. Many times Linda would have to translate as the parents spoke Zulu or Xhosa, but most of the kids spoke English very well. For the first time since I had arrived in South Africa, I truly felt like I had found a niche for myself in both the working and social communities that I was

involved in. I am not saying that I was an assimilated part of either community, but that I felt more comfortable and accepted for who I was as an individual, as opposed to simply being reduced to the stereotype of the foreigner or the American student.

Ultimately my work for the HRC made me see reconciliation as a process that occurs over time and no matter how hard we will it, it cannot take place overnight. This statement might seem pretty obvious to people, but working at the HRC made me understand that reconciliation is an ongoing means to peaceful coexistence. I had originally believed that reconciliation began and ended like a phase, but after the HRC, I came to view reconciliation as something enduring that many future generations must also deal with. In addition to my internship, my community living arrangements and volunteer work showed me that coexistence within the South African context has many different layers. Thus, one cannot start to talk about coexistence without understanding the strength of the family and the community, which are two very positive structures. All of the ideas mentioned above may seem like they should be obvious because they are so simple in theory; however, no matter how much you read about them, it is only when you witness such terms as reconciliation and coexistence in action, that you truly appreciate how complex they really are.

Going to Durban

At the end of August I was presented with the opportunity to visit Kwazulu Natal and then proceed to Capetown with some members of the HRC, in order to sit in on some hearings on human rights violations. The road trip through Natal was beautiful and as we were heading towards the south of the country the terrain became luscious and green,

there were tropical plants and bright colored flowers everywhere, we passed many fields, hills and plantations, and the weather became increasingly warm. Once we arrived in Durban, we went to Kwazulu Natal University for a conference on The State of Violence in South Africa, which was a sobering experience in light of all the horrible statistics that were brought up. The conference made me think of the vast economic disparities between the rich and the poor in the country and how apartheid itself created an environment for this aftermath of violence. After the apartheid regime had been dismantled, racial and human equality came to exist but economic equality is yet to be achieved, and much of the violence can be traced to this problem.

We had the rest of the next two days in Durban to ourselves and so I met up with one of Catherine's Indian friends, Nikhil who took me around the city. Nikhil also introduced me to some of his college friends who were Indian South Africans, which was a very enlightening experience for me as I had not had a chance to socialize with this group. When I was studying South African history, it always amazed me that there existed a large Indian population within the country. I was very impressed with their efforts and collaborations, with the blacks and colored South Africans, in trying to overthrow the Apartheid establishment. I personally felt it was admirable that the Indians did not fall for the apartheid regime's divide and conquer strategies, in which the Afrikaaner government would offer indulgences to some groups over other groups in order to pit different races and tribes against one another. Post-apartheid, most Indians live in Durban, but are scattered all around the country and even though they are a minority within South Africa they are still influential both in the political and economic reconstruction of the nation.

Nikhil and his friends were very forthcoming in their responses to my multiple questions about what it was like to be an Indian South African. It was fascinating to realize that they had a singular Indian identity, spoke languages like Tamil, Gujrati, and Hindi, practiced religions like Hinduism and Islam, ate traditional food and wore customary outfits for rituals, and yet this did not conflict with their identity as South Africans. To me they were equally Indian as they were South African, and to be able to have such complex identities and be content with it, is something very extraordinary. A quote by Mandela comes to mind when I think about the eleven official languages of South Africa and the six Asian languages spoken in Kwa Zulu Natal. He says, “I again realized that we were not different people with separate languages; we were one people, with different tongues.”

Of course Nikhil and his friends spoke of many inter and intra community problems, but I found it interesting that very few were related to any type of identity crisis. I think the highlight of those two days was speaking to a Tamil (my native tongue) family who were originally from Tamil Nadu in Southern India. They made me some excellent rice and curry for lunch, and told me stories about how their forefathers had been brought to South Africa to work on the sugar cane plantations. That was five generations ago and though they had never been to India, they could speak, read and write Tamil fluently! It was a nice way to spend my last day in Durban, and overall I felt such a deep connection to this coastal city, because it reminded me of Sri Lanka, and the people I had met made me miss my family and hometown greatly.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)/ Capetown

After having spent three relatively relaxing days in Durban, it took us nearly eighteen hours to get to Capetown. We took the coastal Garden Route, and the panoramic view of the ocean on one end and countryside on the other, was truly breathtaking. As soon as we arrived in the city, we put left our bags at the motel and proceeded to the TRC office in downtown Capetown to get ready for the hearings.

Essentially this visit to Capetown involved a group of HRC officers who usually went to the different areas in South Africa where TRC hearings were held in order to document, monitor and witness the process. I was supposed to help take notes during the hearings as well as keep the different files of victims in order in case we ever needed them during the hearings, and I certainly had my hands full, considering the vast amount of paperwork that was involved. I knew that I could handle the work because I had already had enough experience in Jo'Burg (which is one of the main reasons I was asked to go on this trip), but what I was not prepared for was the emotional roller-coaster I was about to embark on.

My experiences with victims and their complaints through the Human Rights Commission allowed me to deal with mostly racial, political and economic inequalities and how government policy and the law could be used to rectify these problems and bring about solutions. Working for the TRC and sitting in on these hearings were different because you had both victims and perpetrators of Apartheid related crimes engaging in a process that looked to forgive the past through the recognition of wrongdoings perpetrated by individuals and the preceding government. The two weeks I

spent at these hearings were one of the most grueling and emotionally consuming times of my life.

I cried nearly every day, sometimes during the hearings and other times I would take short breaks to go to the bathroom to wet my face. I never needed to make any excuses for my puffy face or my red eyes to my co-workers because they were more than understanding of the situation as many of them were in the same boat as I. The stories and pictures that were painted by both sides were quite diverse, and yet such common elements such as sorrow, suffering, regret and mercy were part of each and every tale. I know I cannot recount all of my journal entries about every single person that came into that Commission room to be interrogated, but I would like to tell one particular story that has stuck with me to this day.

It was my second day working at the hearings and the very first person to walk into the Commission's room was a black woman who had traveled six hours from a nearby township to testify. She was a very old lady and had trouble seeing so she was helped into her seat and then the questioning began. Sitting in front of her to her left there were two fairly young, clean cut, white men sitting shoulder to shoulder in a very upright manner. The woman, whose name was Doris began to speak very slowly in Tswana and though she also spoke Afrikaans, there was a translator who was repeating everything that was being said into English. Even before she could begin speaking, she began to tear up and cry, and then slowly her narrative began to unfold. She had sent her two daughters and son out during the middle of the day to go get some milk from a local township store, and when they didn't return late in the evening she became very worried and went out with her brother to look for them. At this point the woman was sobbing

uncontrollably and we had to wait for her to take a few breaths before she continued to speak. She said that she found her daughters, eighteen and eleven lying dead (gunshot wounds to the temple) on the side of the street and her son had also been stabbed and slashed several times, to the point that it was hard to recognize who he was. As she was telling her story over a span of an hour, people who were watching in the audience (as the hearings are open to the public) were crying and a few women were wailing out words of comfort and sorrow towards the old woman speaking. At the end of her gruesome story, I had to get up and run to the bathroom because I felt nauseous and knew I was about to throw up. The whole room had been spinning and I become claustrophobic while the story was being told. Thus when she had finished speaking I just ran out of the room, tears streaming down my face, and pushed the toilet stall open and collapsed on the floor. It took all my energy to walk back into the room because all I could see in my mind were those dead bodies on the side of the road, and thinking of a mother discovering her children in this awful state was just too overwhelming.

When I walked back into the room the two young males I had seen earlier, both proceeded to give their testimonies of the same event. They recounted how the woman's children had jeered and made several comments at a commanding officer and as a result how they had been threatened to shut up if they knew what was good for them. When the young boy refused to stop his commenting, the commander had chased after him and though they did not see what happened the youths said they knew the young boy had been killed from the blood on the commander's favorite blade. The commanding officer had also ordered that the two girls be shot for they had witnessed the events, and thus these two males, who had been serving in the Afrikaaner military regime as officers, had

executed that order. While the two men were being questioned and speaking, the old woman was wailing, sobbing and shrieking and it only made me feel worse sending chills down my back. By this time the two males had also broken down and were crying during their testimony, and at the end, one of them looked at the old lady and reading from a piece of paper, asked her for pardon in light of their actions. At this point I was fuming and all I could ask myself, was: “Why did they have to do it?”, “Why did they have to kill innocent children and take away a woman’s whole livelihood?” How could human beings be so callous and cruel to their own kind that they would torture and subject them to such miseries as the ones I was hearing today. I don’t know if the old woman ever said she forgave them, but one of my co-workers did tell me that she had said that at least she knew that her daughters had not been raped before being killed, and that she was glad to find out the truth.

I often think back to that day because it was one of the most painful and heart-wrenching tales I had heard, even though there were many more similar stories that others reported at the hearings that followed. After the hearings I would usually try to take a break and say a little prayer for the surviving and dead victims as well as for those perpetrators who were sorry for their actions. It was hard for me to feel any compassion for the people who were identified and defined as perpetrators, but I do see this process as a powerful force for healing in post-apartheid South Africa. A quote by Dr. Pittyana, the chairman of the HRC, especially comes to mind when I think about the TRC hearings in light of the gross human rights violations that have taken place. He said to me once, “To understand human rights you must understand human wrongs, and to recognize justice you must recognize injustice.” These eloquent words embody the TRC’s true soul

and commitment to ascertaining the “truth” and documenting it for the whole world to read so that no one will ever question or forget this human evil. Even though I have my reservations about the TRC, I did come to believe its goals towards peace and reconciliation are attainable through forgiveness instead of vengeance. This idea that forgiveness and reconciliation are synonymous was something I had always considered, but never realized how difficult a task it was. It made sense to me that once you forgave your perpetrator or a past government for their atrocities, you could start to put aside your anger and grief and try to rebuild your life or the whole nation. I understood this clearly, but I just didn’t fully comprehend the complicated process behind such reconciliation, and this is what the TRC showed me.

During my stay in Capetown, I did a lot of research on such topics as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s divisions and functions, what happens to victims and perpetrators after the hearings, the methods in which hearings are made available in all areas of the country, the different publications that come out as a result of the hearings, and the debate within South Africa about whether the understanding method of truth and reconciliation are acceptable ways of healing South Africa’s pain and suffering. I also had the pleasure of meeting Reverend Desmond Tutu, who struck me as a very sincere and benevolent figure, whom I have great respect and deference for. Though we met very briefly, as he was extremely busy, he took the time out to answer many of my questions and concerns regarding the TRC process and hearings. We discussed and compared the situation in Sri Lanka to South Africa and at the end of our meeting he gave me copies of some publications on the TRC that I had requested, that were no longer being circulated.

Despite the fact that I worked a lot during my stay in Capetown, I did take the weekends off to visit all the famous sites that the city had to offer. Unlike Jo'Burg and Pretoria, Capetown (much like Durban) was a lot safer because it was more tourist-friendly, and thus I was able to go places alone during the day, without worrying too much about being raped or mugged. The city of Capetown itself is divided by Table Mountain, and literally one side of it is inhabited by the well to do white South Africans, while on the other side you find thousands of colored South Africans living in shanty towns similar to those I have previously described. I visited both areas during one day and was again appalled at the disparity in wealth between the two areas-it is just a very hard concept to digest and I hope I never get used to it. Whereas, on one hand you have what looks like a wealthy European town with houses that have beachfront property and more space than you would know what to do with, on the other side you have thousands of tiny corrugated silver, tin shacks that are clumped together closely, with none of the basic necessities. Capetown is a striking city, but just like many other places in South Africa it screams out the many inequalities that this nation must overcome if it hopes to attain the goal of fairness and better opportunities in order to give the majority of its people a brighter and better future.

Conclusion

South Africa is a beautiful place for its significant scenic magnificence, but, in my eyes, more so for the diverse groups that are learning to coexist with each other. I see coexistence in this nation in a light that shows how people are not merely living side by side in conflict, but learning to accept each other's differences in order to bring about peace, prosperity and a stable environment. From my internships and volunteer work, I

have come to see that coexistence works on so many levels from the politicians down to the communities and nuclear families. As I see it, it is towards coexistence that every social development project, NGO and government program (such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) is essentially aiming, for ultimately that is one of South Africa's main goals.

I cannot deny that there were horrible inefficiencies within the system and the law, and that there existed violence and conflicts that were related to racial and economic tensions. I read and heard about these problems on a daily basis, which many times made me wonder what I was doing putting my life in danger by even coming to this country. But no matter how bleak the problems in South Africa may seem, there was still immediate and visible progress, development and improvements that happened every day. It is this atmosphere of helping to heal and build this country which provided many others and me with enough motivation to stay and contribute to the process of peace and reconciliation.

I realize I have omitted many details of my trip that I would have loved to include, such as the many weekend trips I took in order to better explore the stunning sites that South Africa has to offer from Krueger National Park to the Kalahari desert. There are also so many wonderful people from a multitude of backgrounds, that I met along the way, who helped me to grow and learn during this trip. Though I could not mention all of them, I do want to say that it was the human element of interacting with these very enthusiastic and vibrant South Africans, from professionals to inhabitants of townships, that made my experience full and rich. Most of all I am grateful for the many life experiences that I had along the way for no text book can ever replace that.

My last night in South Africa, I wrote in my journal how much I wished I could put this country and all its people into my pocket and take it with me, to share it with everyone I meet. There is something unique about South Africa and its process of reconciliation that is reflected in the attitude of the people you meet, especially those who have been the most atrociously oppressed. Having said all this I would like to leave you with a quote by Mandela from his book, LONG WALK TO FREEDOM which powerfully expresses my own sentiments about the South African people. He states, “My country is rich in the minerals and gems that lie beneath its soil, but I have always known its greatest wealth is its people, finer and truer than the purest diamonds.”

Brahmy Poologasingham

Pax 186A/ Cindy Cohen

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