

# A journey of the heart

Thirteen University of Winnipeg students travelled to South Africa for an emotional living history lesson in post-conflict reconciliation

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**PHOTOS BY COLIN BOURRIER ENLARGE IMAGE**

**Confronting the legacy of apartheid: Robben Island Prison where Mandela was imprisoned (top) ; a sign on display**

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segregation and discrimination that was formalized into law in 1948 and lasted until the early '90s — but also a chance to reflect on Canada's troubled past and the path to reconciliation within our own borders.

Initiated by the University of Winnipeg Global College, the whirlwind, two-and-a-half week course saw the Canadian students join up with six college students from Cape Town's Cornerstone Institute. The group travelled 1,400 kilometres from Capetown to Johannesburg, visiting memorials, museums and other locations along the way — among them, Robben Island, the prison in which Nelson Mandela served 18 of the 27 years he would ultimately spend incarcerated for his role as an anti-apartheid activist. (Released in 1990, Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994.)

Colin Bourrier and Bob Christmas were among the Winnipeg students who took part in the course.

Bourrier, a 20-year-old, third-year student working towards a bachelor's degree in conflict resolution, had a personal connection to the subject matter: his mother was born in South Africa into a mixed-race family; she moved to Canada with her parents and brother in the mid-'70s.

"It was really interesting for me to go there and to get this broader understanding of my past and my family's story," Bourrier says.

Christmas, a 49-year-old staff sergeant with the Winnipeg Police Service, is working on a master's degree in peace and conflict studies, having previously completed a master's in public administration. He enrolled in the course hoping to learn practical ways police can build trust with Aboriginal people and other marginalized communities.

Christmas says a visit to Soweto, a densely populated cluster of Black townships outside Johannesburg, was particularly moving. Soweto was the site of an infamous 1976 incident in which police opened fire on a student protest; hundreds were killed, including 12-year-old Hector Pieteron, whose dying moments were captured in a now-iconic photograph.

As a white police officer, Christmas says he struggled with feelings of guilt by association.

"I could understand the dynamic of the situation that allowed that to happen but, at the same time, I know there's no excuse for those deliberate acts, especially the things that went on — the abductions, the torture, the murders — through apartheid. It's hard to get your head around, but that was a deeply moving thing for me."

In 1995, South Africa launched a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bear witness to the human-rights violations committed during apartheid. As part of their course, students met with one of the TRC commissioners, as well as with

Christmas says he was struck by the indifference some South Africans have to the ongoing suffering of their fellow citizens — an indifference he sees mirrored in Canada. "We have people living on reserves in third-world conditions, and most people go to bed in a middle-class home not thinking about that," he says.