

The Rainbow Academy: A South African Alternative School Packing a Punch!

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On the NEA Foundation Global Learning Fellows' first afternoon in Cape Town, our agenda called for a stop at the Rainbow Academy. I imagined this might be a charter school for LGBTQ youth, but I was way off the mark.

*Each of us is as intimately
attached to the soil of this
beautiful country as are the*

*famous jacaranda trees of
Pretoria and the mimosa trees of
the bushveld – a rainbow nation
at peace with itself and the
world..." -Nelson Mandela, 1994*

The Rainbow Nation was a term first coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe Nelson Mandela's post-apartheid South Africa. Mandela himself enriched the phrase soon after becoming the country's President in the quote above. The [Rainbow Academy](#) comes from this notion. It is a not-for-profit alternative school found in the basement of an office building in the heart of Cape Town. Disadvantaged youth from around the Cape are provided a blended vocational training in the performing arts along with business skills when they attend. Less than 30 of the poorest of the poor are selected for scholarships to attend the academy each year, ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-five.



One of many low-quality photos the author shot in the florescent lamp-lit basement performance space - here are the Rainbow Academy students just prior to doing their first number.

I don't think any of the Fellows was ready for the incredible experience we were about to have. A second tangible story of resilience, grit, and empowerment was about to unfold.

After the morning's Peninsula High site visit (see "Education in Cape Town: A Story of Inequity and Resilience" posted yesterday), we were all painfully aware of the adversity area youth face daily and of the barriers preventing most from earning an education and realizing their potential in society.

The students at the Rainbow Academy have had to overcome the same challenges as the Peninsula High students. In fact, I got the sense that the struggle for those at the academy may often be even more daunting.

The Chairman of the [Rainbow Academy](#), Frank Gormley, is an Irishman. He gave us a powerful introduction, relating how the historic prejudice and adversity is people faced and his own personal experience helps him to empathize, relate to, and understand the struggle of the oppressed here in South Africa. He then turned the program over to the school's staff and the students to share a number of high energy, enthusiastic, and spiritual singing, drumming, and dancing for us.

I wish there was a way to embed some video footage in this posting to share the students' energy we witnessed from the get-go.

Yes, their raw talent blew us away. These young people are not aspiring performers; these are unpaid professionals eager for more. Despite the 35% unemployment found here, even worse in that 50% of the unemployed are 18-25, these young people have hope. They celebrate their culture through drama, dance, and song. They embody the future of South Africa, despite the improbable odds they must overcome. Indeed, this is a story of empowerment and of hope. It is exciting.

The fluorescent lights in the basement did not lend themselves toward quality photographs. I got nothing of value in the way of images from the afternoon, not wanting to blind the performers with a flash. In retrospect, I wish I would have packed my Nikon outfit to the site. I usually don't travel with a DSLR camera, as the size and weight don't make sense in foreign lands. This, however, would have been an excellent time to break that tradition.



One of two drummers focusing in on the start of the next song.

After a couple hours of performing for us and then pulling us in and dancing/singing with us, the students ended by introducing themselves. They said their names, and then shared with us their favorite action – a dramatic performance, a poem they had written, a dance move. It was astounding. I teared up a couple times during those introductions, and I doubt there was a dry eye in the place by the time we all huddled around for a group photo at the end. Such an incredible afternoon. Thank You for your time, your energy, and the inspiration, people. Thank you.

If there is a way to bring The Rainbow Academy to the States, specifically to Montana, I am interested in assisting. This is a group of young people who stand tall and represent their people, their country, their music and their arts as authentic heroes from the Cape. I can't



The author gets a selfie with half a dozen of the academy performers - YESSS!!!

imagine the dimension they could add to, for example, our annual state student council convention.

Our students would be touched by a foreign people and their culture, and they would invariably be effected by the relationship with rural Montanans.

Time will tell, but for now, just as the Academy students, I will

dream of the future, move boldly forward, and see what comes to fruition.



A group photo taken after our final activity, including both the 2018 Class of NEA Foundation Global Learning Fellows and the students of the Rainbow Academy.

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