

# FINDING YOUR INNER VOICE



photo by STEPHEN McDUFF

## Professors and students trek the globe to stand up for human rights issues

by ELIZABETH KOCH

Whether working for human rights in South Africa or seeking political justice in Latin America, Truman State University is leaving its mark across the globe.

Sociology professor Elaine McDuff takes 10 to 20 students to Cape Town, South Africa, during a summer session course. The trips enable students to participate in human rights efforts by working in health clinics and schools near Cape Town.

McDuff first visited South Africa in 2009 with 12 students, each of whom interned with various human rights organizations for more than three weeks. Most of these organizations dealt with health and politics, including the HIV Counseling and Testing Campaign and the Cape Town refugee center.

After students expressed increased interest in the program, McDuff took 21 students for more than five weeks two years later. She explains by immersing themselves for up to a month in Cape Town, students

acquire a much deeper understanding of the issues facing these communities.

Students record their experiences in a comprehensive blog for post-trip reflection. The entries begin with preparation for the trip and end with returning to the United States.

Many of the student internships are located in the townships, including Khayelitsha and Tafelsig, which are more like shantytowns that lack stores, restaurants and basic infrastructure.

Such towns often emphasize self-segregation among black and mixed-race South Africans. Black South Africans are

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photo by STEPHEN McDUFF

Lena Benoit and Elaine McDuff in Benoit's third grade classroom at Christel House, an independent school that provides quality education for children from extremely poor families.



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Truman intern Margaret Loehning in the therapy room at Maitland Cottage Hospital, a pediatric facility for children recovering from orthopedic surgery.

treated worse than those of mixed descent, mainly because mixed-race South Africans have at least one white European ancestor.

One Truman student interned at a health clinic in one of the poorest mixed-race townships. McDuff explains the student spent much of her time weighing babies, helping patients feel calm and safe, and doing whatever she could to help.

"[The intern] is not a doctor or a nurse so she was just providing help and support to people," McDuff notes. "[She] learned a lot about the healthcare system and some of the challenges that they face."

Other students worked in Christel House, a private school that provides a comprehensive education and support system for the poorest families near Cape Town. After applying and showing academic promise, students are guided from kindergarten through 12th grade, with follow-up after graduation. The students' parents also receive help finding jobs.

Other Truman students become

involved with the Cape Town Refugee Center, where they help sort records of the special needs children. The interns often hear stories about refugees being torn away from their homes.

"South Africa draws refugees from all over because, economically, they're doing much better than so many places," McDuff says. "They're trying to help people establish themselves and define the kind of services they need to be able to be employed and support themselves."

Many of the students involved in the program continue to pursue humanitarian work, later transferring their experiences and skills from their internships to their careers.

Alumnus Adam Conway participated in the program's first excursion during 2009. Conway now works as the Program Coordinator for Chicago HOPES, a tutoring and arts program for students living in homeless shelters in Chicago.

Another alumna, Katherine Olsen-

Flaate, is working as a Princeton-in-Asia fellow with the Naz Foundation, which serves AIDS orphans in New Dehli, India.

For other participants, this one-time experience can provide a sense of direction toward future careers. McDuff says she hopes students take away unforgettable experiences from the program while also attempting to make a difference.

"My goal is to give students an opportunity to be engaged in a direct, hands-on way with the kinds of struggles that people themselves in South Africa are engaged in," McDuff says.

## TRUMAN FACULTY MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Like McDuff, History professor Marc Becker spends much of his time in Latin America, where he's been serving as a hands-on activist since the 1980s.

Dressed in holey jeans and black suspenders, Becker sits down, kicks off his shoes and explains how his passion for human rights began after he was bullied



photo by STEPHEN McDUFF

**ABOVE:** Truman Anthropology major Sam Spencer with a new friend in front of the Community Center in the Langa township.

**RIGHT:** Media Liaison Trevor Davids talks with the student interns at the command center of the Independent Electoral Commission, a permanent body in charge of managing free and fair elections in South Africa.



photo by STEPHEN McDUFF

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in high school. As a result, he transferred to a different school and made a handful of close friends. Becker realized others in the world struggled as he had, leading him to fight for everyone to have a just and happy life.

“It led me to question everything I thought I knew about the world,” Becker explains.

Now Becker works on human rights issues across the globe. After visiting Nicaragua in 1985, he focused on the struggle for equal elections and voting rights, further serving as an elections observer in nearby El Salvador and Venezuela. He also has worked on documenting paramilitary attacks on peace communities in Colombia.

Becker says he does not do quantitative research. Rather, he interviews attack victims and then distributes the information through publications like the Colombia Support Network’s “Action on Columbia. Becker’s main goal is to raise awareness and encourage policy changes in the U.S. and Colombia.

Becker says he decides where to go based on opportunities that arise and issues he thinks are important to address. He admits it’s a bonus when the trip is to a

country he’s never been to before.

Becker recalls heading for Haiti after noting how often the country came up in class discussions. He joined two other organizations: the Marin Interfaith Task Force on the Americas, a grassroots organization that educates and aids others, and the Latin American Solidarity Coalition, which combines common goal-oriented organizations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

After removing president Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) — a U.N. peacekeeping mission — began in 2004. While in Haiti, Becker wrote a 20-page report concerning the abuse people suffered at the hands of MINUSTAH, which many believed to be merely a continuation of imperial power.

“[U.N. troops] were shooting on people in neighborhoods, like going into neighborhoods, not understanding what was happening, being scared, and just shooting people,” Becker says. “We interviewed people who were basically full of bullets, and took pictures and wrote up the documentation of that.”

Becker uses these experiences as teaching tools in his Latin American

history classes. As learning through experience is often more effective than reading facts out of a textbook, Becker says he thinks his travels provide meaningful anecdotes for his students.

“If we understand how the world works better we can be better citizens and make more conscious decisions,” he says.

Becker says he believes the presence of human rights activism on college campuses also is vital, especially at liberal arts and sciences institutions. Above all, he describes the purpose of his travels as exemplifying Truman’s liberal arts mission.

“Having those discussions, at least, I think are crucial for issues of citizenship and engagement with the broader world,” Becker says. “Anything that helps us understand the broader world out there is really central to our mission.”


Becker’s wife, Cheryl Musch, says college professors with a strong passion for human rights, like her husband, are complimentary to students.

“I definitely think all of that real world experience makes [Becker’s] work and interest in human rights and his academic ability to communicate those things much stronger,” she says.

For about 18 years, Musch has been working with fair trade, purchasing goods and paying the creator an equitable amount of money to promote sustainability. She spent the last 10 years traveling throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America.

“I think the fact that it enables people to make a better way for themselves has a lot of appeal to me,” Musch says. “I think you can hand out money or you can train people so they have skills, and when they have skills, they can actually get beyond what you were able to give them.”

Musch is the executive director of the non-profit organization Partners for Just Trade. The PJT sells handcrafts, such as woven hats and gloves, from Peru and impoverished cities throughout the Andes along with dried fruit from Africa. She says once these people learn how to make something, they can feel empowered.

“If you have a touch point with some poverty through some human rights work, or some situation that’s much more difficult than your own, it changes your whole perspective,” Musch says. 



**ABOVE:** Truman interns Sarah Stubbert, Elizabeth Hatting, and Amelia Bursi with a South African colleague at the South African NGO Coalition, whose goal is to provide support to organizations fighting poverty and inequality.

**BELOW:** Kelsey Louder at her internship with the Network on Violence Against Women, an agency that works on programs aimed at empowering victims of gender violence.

