



QPSW Journal Letter from South Africa

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Dear Friends,

Just after my last journal letter, I spent two weeks on a home-stay in Soweto. Though I had been to the township several times before, I was a little uncertain about how basic things, like transport to and from town using the taxi buses, would work. Its also always a bit strange going to stay with people I hardly know, not knowing the routines of the house, what I'd be expected to do, and so on.

That odd feeling only lasted a few days, and I soon felt very much at home with the warm welcome my host family gave me. It was just nice to be staying in a family setting again, with a strong sense of local community around us. Just a trip down the road involved greeting everyone on the way there and back again. We often had people popping in for tea and a chat, or small children from neighbouring houses would simply spend the day with us. I felt quite sad moving back into my cottage afterwards, returning to a more affluent and overwhelmingly white area where no-one generally knows their neighbours, stops to say hello, or even risks making eye contact.



my host family in Soweto – Corlette, Gogo and Ginger (the dog)

My home-stay was partly intended to help me learn some more isiZulu, one of the many languages spoken in South Africa, and a useful one to know around Johannesburg. I'd already had some lessons and knew a few phrases, but this more prolonged exposure was useful, as were the tips on pronunciation and grammar which my host and language helper Corlette gave me. However it was difficult to stay away from using English when I wanted to learn more about the people and issues around me – the other main intention of the home-stay – especially as my host family spoke English well.

During one of my conversations with 'Gogo' (grandmother) I realised she was the same age as my own gran, as well as sharing a strong sense of pride in family, enormous appetite for hard work, and delicious tendency to collapse into helpless giggles. It was interesting to compare lifelines of these two people born in the same year, but into different cultures and circumstances in different parts of the same continent: one in the highveld here in the south, and my own in the Rift Valley of east Africa.

Gogo was born in Sophiatown, a relatively mixed settlement north of central Johannesburg, an economically impoverished area but rich in music and community spirit. She told me about trips to the cinema there, and her favourite curries from the Indian restaurants, which still echo in her spicy cooking today. There is something quite distinctive about all the elderly people I've met who once lived there, about the way they carry themselves.

All too much for the white authorities, who demolished Sophiatown, and moved its inhabitants into racially segregated areas safely out of sight of the city. Gogo was one of many 'Zulu' speakers moved out to Meadowlands in Soweto, although she like many doesn't fit neatly into that tribal category. The only shops were expensive white-owned ones with limited stock, and there were no jobs locally.

Peering into the past, I find it difficult to imagine the surroundings and day-to-day lives of either grandmother, let alone the hardships of life while they were raising families. Then Soweto in the seventies burst into open unrest, following decades of more peaceful protests with few results, and youngsters formed the front line. People now talk of a 'lost generation' said to have been sacrificed for the struggle, boycotting schools and losing all respect for authority, including within their own families.

The struggle against legal apartheid may be over, yet that lost generation still have little education, jobs or future. They also have a sense of being betrayed by the politicians they fought for, who are seen as corrupt, inefficient or simply as having sold out. Some of the lines between being a comrade and being a gangster, a 'tsotsi', were already blurred, and crime seemed the only way to gain money and respect.

Crime is a big issue in the township, and local people are tired of it. My car radio was stolen despite the car being parked in a garage during my home-stay, and my hosts were much more upset than I was. (In some areas, I've heard that the young thieves limit their activities to town, as they would be lynched if caught stealing in the community here. Community policing initiatives are themselves seen as corrupt).

AIDS is also taking its toll – two people died on our street in the two weeks I was staying, and there are constantly people knocking on the door to collect money for funerals. Despite the prominent awareness-raising campaigns, a mini-industry in itself, there is still a lot of misinformation, and people are worried about taking tests, and how the community will react to their disclosing positive HIV status.

There is huge overcrowding, following decades of deliberately inadequate building programmes, in order to discourage blacks from living near Johannesburg. In a small ‘four room house’ like the one I was staying in (two bedrooms, lounge and kitchen) it’s not unusual to have five or more people staying, often several relatives being supported by a single wage-earner or grandparent with a pension. Now people are permitted to own their own properties, some have extended their houses, or had small shacks erected in the back gardens.

It is still hard for me to understand how little there is to do in the township. Generally people wake early and clean, to get rid of the fine dust that blows in from the dusty roads and nearby mine dumps. Then, for those without a job, or engaged in education, there is a whole day to fill. Many will be sitting on the stoop at the front of the house, or watching awful and unreal American sitcoms, or simply staying in bed most of the day. It must be easy to get depressed in such bleak surroundings, feeling there is nothing to look forward to. One young man was found having hanged himself – just across the road from where we were running a community workshop in the same area, which cast a shadow over our remaining few hours, as we saw the coroner’s vehicle pull up and heard the mourning relatives.

There is also a complex issue around the lack of entrepreneurship. The black community have little access to capital and some skills, but the apartheid system of education was also geared to creating docile workers, ‘employees not employers’ as a very motivated electrician told me, and that mindset still persists. A few young people I’ve met who were setting up their own businesses really stood out for their drive and enthusiasm. Sadly those who are successful tend to move out of Soweto, leaving few positive role-models for the younger generation (although they do tend to ‘sleep in their new houses, but still live in Soweto’ – coming back for the sense of community absent in the more affluent areas).

These are some of the bitter and lasting legacies of apartheid, but there are signs of change happening again, partly as a new generation tries to improve their luck. My host Corlette, a young man my age, is just one of my host organisation’s large team of committed volunteers drawn from the Meadowlands area. When I arrived for my home-stay, one of his friends from the neighbourhood was eagerly grilling him about the Alternatives to Violence workshops he facilitates, totally ignoring my arrival. Since December I’ve met that person several times just around the neighbourhood, facilitated the first-level workshop he attended, and saw him doing role-plays at a second-level workshop, and been very touched by the change I’ve seen in him, which he’s been very conscious of himself.

During my home-stay, Corlette and I started making arrangements for an AVP workshop at a local youth group, just down the road from the house I was staying. Again, the seriousness and enthusiasm with which they wanted to learn about other ways of resolving conflicts, and stop them escalating, and basically do anything that could help their community, was a pleasant surprise for myself and the other facilitators. Some of that group should go on to become facilitators themselves, at a ‘Training for Facilitators’ workshop next weekend, and I look forward to working with them in the future.

Apart from my home-stay, I've been doing a variety of work since my last letter. Our team of volunteers is growing rapidly, and we needed to update our office systems, get various computers working and networked, and set up some information systems help us to stay organised. I've also been working on marketing material and pricing structures, mainly for our tourism work, including our website. I'm involved in similar support work for a homelessness outreach project in central Johannesburg, and an AIDS-awareness drama group as well.

On the AVP side, apart from the community workshops in Meadowlands I mentioned, we've been working in settings such as schools, with staff at hospitals and youth awaiting trial. My colleagues are currently supporting new AVP programmes in Angola and Hong Kong. As soon as I finish this letter, I'm leaving for a prison conference in Kuruman (where my co-worker Helen is based) to do a taster workshop jointly with delegates and prisoners there.

Just after Christmas we took two large groups from America around Soweto. Our visits include a cultural workshop, giving visitors a chance to learn some of a local language, and examining similarities and differences in how we do simple things, such as inviting a guest into one's house. This revealed some large differences in custom across different parts of the US that I hadn't been aware of, reminding me how little I know about that country. It's also been important to meet many people from the States who are against the looming war. Our peace march in Johannesburg, had a good turn-out, with a wide range of people taking part.

Over this first six months of my placement, I've been lucky to see a lot of South Africa, live and work in a range of different environments, with a huge variety of people. Its been fascinating and challenging and interesting and educational and more fun than is probably good for me! I've had some friends visiting from home over the past month, which has been wonderful, especially having the chance to share some of this new part of my life, and realise quite how far I've travelled, in many ways.

With best wishes,

Anand